**Enrichment: Second Session**

**Looking at Literature through the lens of Critical Theory**

**Pre-session Reading**

In our second session we’re going to be thinking about how we, as students of English Literary texts, can expand and enrich our understanding and enjoyment of those texts. A reading of the material below before the session on Tuesday would be very useful, though not essential. We’ll be looking again at ‘A Cat in the Rain’, so a quick re-read of that would be useful too.

At GCSE level, we are mostly looking at literature in terms of the ways writers ‘craft’ their texts through the use of language, form and structure. We also think about literary texts in terms of the contexts in which they were written – what was the historical/social background out of which the text emerged? What do we know about the writer’s biography?

So when studying a Shakespeare play, we are used to analysing his metaphors, his blank verse lines, his soliloquies; we are also familiar with the religious beliefs of the late sixteenth/early seventeenth centuries, the attitudes to women prevalent at the time etc.

At A Level and beyond, we begin to bring in other ways of evaluating and responding to literature: we start to consider the complex world of Literary Critical Theory. In the second session we are going to focus on just two of the many critical theories open to the reader today: the Feminist and the Structuralist critical approaches.

Before you have a quick read of the outlines of both of these critical theories, I’m just going to give you two quotations to consider. One is from a poem, ‘The Tables Turned’, written in 1798 by the Romantic poet William Wordsworth. In it, he questions the value of rational analysis, saying it is better to appreciate nature and other forms of beauty through the heart rather than the intellect.

***Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;***

***Our meddling intellect***

***Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—***

***We murder to dissect.***

***Enough of Science and of Art;***

***Close up those barren leaves;***

***Come forth, and bring with you a heart***

***That watches and receives.***

The other quotation is by an influential twentieth century critic and novelist, David Lodge, who asks the same question in different terms, but who, unlike Wordsworth, doesn’t give a definitive answer to the question but leaves it hanging…..

***“Is it possible, or useful, to bring the whole battery of modern formalism and structuralism to bear upon a single text, and what is gained by so doing? Does it enrich our reading by uncovering depths and nuances of meaning we might not otherwise have brought to consciousness, help us to solve problems of interpretation and to correct misreadings? Or does it merely encourage a pointless and self-indulgent academicism, by which the same information is shuffled from one set of categories to another, from one jargon to another, without any real advance in appreciation or understanding?***

Before we begin our exploration of ‘A Cat in the Rain’, a piece of autobiographical writing and some poetry through the means of Feminist and Structuralist readings, have a think about whether you believe your understanding of the texts will be helped or hindered by this academic exercise – and then keep an open mind as you come into the second Enrichment session!

**Feminist Literary Theory**

From ***Beginning Theory*** by P. Barry (2002)

“The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the ‘women’s movement’ of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence. In this sense the women’s movement has always been crucially concerned with books and literature, so that feminist criticism should not be seen as an off-shoot or spin-off from feminism which is remote from the ultimate aims of the movement, but as one of its most practical ways of influencing everyday conduct and attitudes.

The concern with ‘conditioning’ and ‘socialisation’ underpins a crucial set of distinctions, that between the terms ‘feminist’, ‘female’, and ‘feminine’. As Toril Moi explains, the first is ‘a political position’, the second ‘a matter of biology’, and the third ‘a set of culturally defined characteristics’. Particularly in the distinction between the second and third of these lies much of the force of feminism….

…The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of ‘socialisation’, since it provided the role models which indicated to women and men what constituted acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. Feminists pointed out, for example, that in nineteenth-century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they are driven to it by dire necessity. Instead, the focus of interest is on the heroine’s choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfilment in life, or her lack of these.

Thus, in feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural ‘mind-set’ in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality. Critical attention was given to books by male writers in which influential or typical images of women were constructed. Necessarily, the criticism which undertook this work was combative and polemical. Then, in the 1980s, in feminism as in other critical approaches, the mood changed. *Firstly,* feminist criticism became much more eclectic, meaning that it began to draw upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism – Marxism, structuralism, linguistics, and so on. *Secondly*, it switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. *Thirdly*, attention was switched to the need to construct a new canon of women’s writing by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence.

**What Feminist Critics Do**

From ***Beginning Theory*** by P. Barry (2002)

1. Rethink the canon, aiming at the rediscovery of texts written by women.
2. Revalue women’s experience.
3. Examine representations of women in literature by men and women.
4. Challenge representations of women as ‘Other’, as ‘lack’, as part of ‘nature’.
5. Examine power relations which obtain in texts and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as a political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy.
6. Recognise the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem ‘natural’ and transparent.
7. Raise the questions of whether men and women are ‘essentially’ different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different.
8. Explore the question of whether there is a female language, an *ecriture* *feminine*, and whether this is also available to men.
9. Make clear the ideological base of supposedly ‘neutral’ or ‘mainstream’ literary interpretations.

**What do structuralist critics do/believe?**

* They believe things (including words and literary texts) can only be understood in relation to their wider context and the larger structures of which they are a part (for example, an individual novel should only be seen in relation to the whole genre of the novel).
* Structuralists explore the significance of the patterns, contrasts and so on within the context of larger structures, for example the genre or society.
* Rather than focusing on the content of a literary text, structuralists are interested in looking first for any parallels, echoes, reflections, repetitions, contrasts and patterns.
* Although structuralists are interested in the underlying patterns outside the text, the readings are based on a close analysis of language choices and narrative techniques of the text itself.
* The structuralist’s interpretation of the text is based on the significance of these patterns.
* Post-structuralists focus on the gaps, absences and silences in a text.

I look forward to seeing/hearing you all next week!

Caroline Barrett

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