

Norwich School English Department

Introduction to Critical Theory

Table of Contents

HOW DO WE READ?	3
ARCHETYPAL CRITICISM	4
RUSSIAN FORMALISM	4
NEW HISTORICISM	4
MARXISM	4
FEMINIST CRITICISM	4
PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM	4
<i>THE THREE LITTLE PIGS</i>	5
READING <i>THE THREE LITTLE PIGS</i>	9

How Do We Read?

Reading is something we get taught at primary school. Right?

Well, there is a difference between understanding the meanings (or some of the meanings) implied by the words on the page and reading.

Here's an example: (I cannot confirm that it is true... but I love the story). The Greek tragedy, *Antigone*, was performed in occupied France. Both Nazi and French audience members gave it a standing ovation:

The Nazis saw the play as demonstrating the futility of resisting a ruler.
French members of the audience saw the play as demonstrating the unbreakable human spirit – even when faced with dictatorial oppression.

See? Everyone in the audience heard the same words spoken, but two contradictory readings emerged.

Archetypal Criticism

This focuses on mythical patterns within literature which, because they are based on experiences intrinsic to human existence, are both deeply rooted and enduring. Such themes which are rooted in myth include the death-rebirth cycle; the search or quest for healing or regeneration; the battle with, and defeat of, a monster; and the Frankenstein and Faust myths.

Russian Formalism

This way of reading originated in the 1920s. Formalists focused upon the 'objective scrutiny of form, structure and language' (King and King) in texts, directing attention away from the author to the literary text itself, which worked because it defamiliarized language and allowed readers to see objects or ideas with a new awareness.

New Historicism

Since the 1980s this has been influential. It reacts against Formalism as it is interested in the critical reception texts received and their contexts. It challenges comfortable traditional assumptions, tending to place texts in subversive contexts: homosexuality and criminality, for example.

Marxism

Marxist critics believe that historical and social developments have been influenced by class struggle. Since works of literature contain a view of society unique to their period in history, they should be studied within their contexts. Much Marxist criticism concentrates on a text's level of realism.

Feminist Criticism

The central premise is that society is patriarchal (dominated by men) and that literature reflects this. Feminist critics are interested in the treatment of women writers and are doing much to redefine the canon (the notional list of 'greats' that show writing at its best). They are also interested in the portrayal of women in literature and in how language itself is biased towards male dominance.

Psychoanalytical Criticism

Especially influenced by the theories of Freud. Freud believed that repressed desires do not vanish and that they are instead expressed in another form. So, the unacceptable becomes acceptable as the author's deep-rooted desires are disguised by symbolism.

The Three Little Pigs

Try applying the various theories to 'The Three Little Pigs'.

Look for the author's use of language for effect; whether it reminds you of ancient myths you know; property and social class, how the story could symbolize repressed desires or fears; gender roles.

Once upon a time there was a mother pig who had three little pigs.

The three little pigs grew so big that their mother said to them, "You are too big to live here any longer. You must go and build houses for yourselves. But take care that the wolf does not catch you.

The three little pigs set off. "We will take care that the wolf does not catch us," they said.

Soon they met a man who was carrying some straw. "Please will you give me some straw?" asked the first little pig. "I want to build a house for myself."

"Yes," said the man and he gave the first little pig some straw.

Then the first little pig built himself a house of straw. He was very pleased with his house. He said, "Now the wolf won't catch me and eat me."

"I shall build a stronger house than yours," said the second little pig. "I shall build a stronger house than yours, too," said the third little pig.

The second little pig and the third little pig went on along the road. Soon they met a man who was carrying some sticks.

"Please will you give me some sticks?" asked the second little pig. "I want to build a house for myself."

"Yes," said the man and he gave the second little pig some sticks.

Then the second little pig built himself a house of sticks. It was stronger than the house of straw.

The second little pig was very pleased with his house. He said, "Now the wolf won't catch me and eat me."

"I shall build a stronger house than yours," said the third little pig.

The third little pig walked on, along the road, by himself. Soon he met a man carrying some bricks.

"Please will you give me some bricks?" asked the third little pig. "I want to build a house for myself."

"Yes," said the man and he gave the third little pig some bricks.

Then the third little pig built himself a house of bricks. It took him a long time to build it, for it was a very strong house.

The third little pig was very pleased with his house.

He said, "Now the wolf won't catch me and eat me."

The next day the wolf came along the road. He came to the house of straw which the first little pig had built.

When the first little pig saw the wolf coming, he ran inside his house and shut the door. The wolf knocked on the door and said, "Little pig, little pig, let me come in."

"No, no," said the little pig. "By the hair of my chinny chin chin, I will not let you come in." "Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in," said the wolf.

So he huffed and he puffed and he huffed and he puffed. The house of straw fell down and the wolf ate up the first little pig.

The next day the wolf walked further along the road. He came to the house of sticks which the second little pig had built.

When the second little pig saw the wolf coming, he ran inside his house and shut the door. The wolf knocked on the door and said, "Little pig, little pig, let me come in."

"No, no," said the little pig. "By the hair of my chinny chin chin, I will not let you come in." "Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in," said the wolf.

So he huffed and he puffed and he huffed and he puffed. The house of sticks fell down and the wolf ate up the second little pig.

The next day the wolf walked further along the road. He came to the house of bricks which the third little pig had built.

When the third little pig saw the wolf coming, he ran inside his house and shut the door. The wolf knocked on the door and said, "Little pig, little pig, let me come in."

"No, no," said the little pig. "By the hair of my chinny chin chin, I will not let you come in." "Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in," said the wolf.

So he huffed and he puffed and he huffed and he puffed. But the house of bricks did not fall down.

The wolf was very angry, but he pretended not to be. He thought, "This is a clever little pig. If I want to catch him I must pretend to be his friend."

So the wolf said, "Little pig, if you will be ready at six o'clock in the morning, I will take you to Farmer Smith's field. We shall find some nice turnips for dinner."

"Very well," said the little pig. But the third little pig was a clever little pig. He knew that the wolf just wanted to eat him.

So the next morning the third little pig set off for Farmer Smith's field at five o'clock. He filled his basket with turnips. Then he hurried home before it was six o'clock.

At six o'clock the wolf knocked on the little pig's door. "Are you ready, little pig?" he said. "Oh! I have been to Farmer Smith's field," said the little pig. "I filled my basket with turnips and they are now cooking for my dinner."

The wolf was very angry, but he pretended not to be.

Then the wolf said, "If you will be ready at five o'clock in the morning, I will take you to Farmer Brown's apple tree. We will pick some red apples."

"Very well," said the little pig.

Next morning, the little pig set off at four o'clock. He found the apple tree. He was up in the tree, picking apples, when the wolf came along.

The little pig was very frightened, but he pretended not to be. He said, "These are fine apples, Mr. Wolf. I'll throw you one."

He threw down an apple, but it rolled away down the road. The wolf ran after it.

Then the little pig jumped down from the tree. He ran all the way home and shut his door quickly.

When the wolf heard this he was very, very, very angry indeed.

He said, "Little pig, I am going to eat you up. I am going to climb down your chimney to get you."

The little pig was very frightened, but he said nothing. He put a big pot of water on the fire, to boil.

The wolf climbed on the roof. Then he began to come down the chimney.

The little pig took off the lid from the pot. Into the pot fell the wolf, with a big splash. And that was the end of the wolf.

The third little pig was too clever for him.

The end.

Reading *The Three Little Pigs*

1. Close textual analysis reveals the real value of this story. The formulaic start, 'Once upon time' offers a timeless dimension for the references which follow. Repetitive sequencing gives structural cohesion to the piece, both in dialogue "little pig, little pig, let me come in' and in the narrative voice 'and he blew the house down'. Phonological effects are used for characterization, 'Not by the hair on my chinny chin chin', and to create tension, 'Then he huffed and he puffed...' The memorable alliteration of Big Bad Wolf' has guaranteed the fame of this antagonist.
2. Defamiliarization is evident in the anthropomorphization of the principle characters. Mythical and primordial images are inherent in every line: the beast at the door; the usurper; Grendel, and other monster myths. Links might also be traced to Goldilocks and the Three Bears (which also features an intruder into domestic bliss) and Grimm's Little Red Riding Hood (which similarly introduced a Big Bad Wolf). Traces of the story might be found in later texts such as *The Three Musketeers* (again, featuring a trio fighting tyrannous forces).
3. The story is typical of the bourgeois mentality which glorifies property ownership – the bigger the better. The author is clearly influenced by capitalist ideology and portrays the pigs as heroes of materialism. The wolf symbolizes bourgeois fear of dispossession. On the other hand, perhaps the story is to be viewed as great literature: the pigs represent the proletarian underbelly of society. The Big Bad Wolf represents the ruling class, the greedy aristocrat who seeks to benefit from the labour of others. Their rebellion and refusal to relinquish power prefigures revolutionary movements of the modern period.
4. The author was clearly repressed. The chimney is a phallic symbol, with the fire roaring beneath as a symbol of passion. Or perhaps the fire could be seen as a cathartic experience, as the wolf achieves self-knowledge by recognizing and facing his burning desires. Alternatively, the brick house may represent the protection that individuals seek in order to secure privacy, security and stability. Taken a step further, the wolf's journey through the chimney to the cosy interior of the brick house might symbolize a desire to return to the womb – an inversion of the birth process.
5. It is clear that the story was written in a way that reflects the patriarchal values of former times, for it depicts three male characters who establish themselves in domestic settings, thus displacing women as the traditional homemakers. To protect their territory, they turn the brick house into a fortress and subvert the female use of the cooking pot for violent ends. The struggles of the pigs elevates them to heroic status: in this story, patriarchal values reign supreme – it doesn't even bother to feature women as victims in need of protection or as prizes to be fought for (a concept which is reflected in even the earliest literature).

Select a new story to read using different critical theories. Try to pick something fairly short and simple ('The Sleeping Beauty', 'Bluebeard' or 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves' would all be suitable if you are struggling to think of an appropriate story). For more of a challenge, look at Charlotte Perkins Gilman's disturbing short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. Write a series of paragraphs offering different readings of your text. You do not have to use every critical theory explored in class but aim to use as many as you can.