For many of us, literary theory conjures up vague memories of nebulous concepts and uninspiring articles, half-heartedly glanced over during our undergraduate degrees and soon forgotten. Or perhaps that’s just me. Nevertheless, when I began to revisit the field I was surprised to find that it was not only a fascinating one, but in fact ripe with potential for exploration in the secondary English classroom. If carefully applied, an understanding of theory can enhance and lead to an informed personal reading that opens up new pathways into a text.

The vast collection of ideologies, hypotheses and practices broadly classed as “theory” can serve multiple purposes in any study of literature. Literary theory can explain texts in new ways, making literature accessible and applicable to wider modern audiences. Or it can qualify the academic processes of studying literature, turning a rather ethereal touch-feely subject into a scientific one. As a teacher of boys who do not particularly relish talking about their feelings, I was particularly interested in the latter.

Essentially, I was attracted to the idea of a range of new classroom tools which would equip me to answer the hard questions: “Why are we doing this?” , “What is the point of studying literature?”, or – worst of all – “Aren’t you just making up stuff the author never intended?”

Moreover, teaching literature from theoretical perspectives means that students can choose their own ways into texts, draw meaningful connections to their own lives, deepen their literary analysis, broaden their intertextual understanding, and – in the constant struggle to achieve those elusive top grades in external exams – offer a fresh, sophisticated perspective on classic literary texts.

I would suggest that any study of literature from theoretical perspectives must begin with an interrogation of our existing reading practices.

As English teachers, we tend to approach (and teach students to approach) literature from a very traditional point of view where the text is central. Practical criticism follows a fairly simple formula. We read a text largely in isolation, with little more than a cursory glance at related social, historical or biographical information. We touch on plot, structure, style, setting and character, but tend to focus on theme. All aspects of the text are related to some greater authorial purpose, and searching for a didactic or moral message that can be drawn from the text, and how this can be related to human nature in general or our own lives in particular. We seek to uncover the “answer”, the “meaning” of a text, analyse how that meaning has been created, and then learn the appropriate lessons.
“THAT’S AN AWFUL LOT TO MAKE ONE WORD MEAN”: APPLYING LITERARY THEORY IN THE SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Literary theorists refer to this kind of approach as “liberal humanism.” They point out that it is socially and politically vague and noncommittal, and it implies that all texts mean the same thing to all people at all times. It is this belief in a constant (yet largely undefined) “human nature” – to which literature supposedly speaks – that is most often criticised by proponents of later theories.

In the secondary English classroom this form of close reading is important, and our assessment system requires students to be able to perform it. It will inevitably form the basis of any textual study we undertake with our students. I do not mean to imply that it is any way less valid than other approaches to literature; but I do feel very strongly that it should not be the only way students ever look at literature.

Many of us are already familiar with a range of different literary theories and reading approaches, but find it tricky to put them to practical use in the classroom. A good way to see how this might work in action is by creating several different theoretical readings of the same text, and then looking at how they differ.

Let us proceed, then, on a whistle-stop tour of a few types of literary theory, and the resulting readings of Katherine Mansfield’s well-known short story, Miss Brill.

Liberal Humanism

How would a traditional liberal humanist approach to this story present itself? By looking within the story for a comment on human nature, a criticism of society, or a warning to the individual. These are all certainly contained in the story if one wishes to find them: the themes of isolation, voyeurism, and introspection are apparent.

Freudian Psychoanalytic Criticism

Sigmund Freud’s theories of the unconscious, while largely discredited by modern psychologists in their accuracy to the workings of the human mind, still work remarkably well in literature. Freudian psychoanalytic criticism is moreover great fun and allows students to bandy big words about, which they always love.

Freudian criticism can be undertaken in several ways:
- Psychoanalysing characters within the text to determine their unconscious motivations and desires
- Psychoanalysing an author based on an analysis of recurring symbols or ideas in a body of work
- Demonstrating classic Freudian processes, stages or conditions within characters or a text itself
- Analysing what it is about “great” works of literature that captures the imagination or desires of large numbers of readers.

Key concepts in Freudian psychoanalytic criticism:
- Developmental stages (Oedipal complex; id, ego and superego)
- Dreamworks (displacement, condensation)
- Unconscious processes (repression, transference, projection, sublimation, parapraxis)

A liberal humanist approach to Miss Brill

A traditional close-reading essay could easily pick out one or more of these themes, discuss their relevance to the human condition, and identify how they are developed through the use of narrative perspective, symbolism, etc.

Start here but once students have accomplished this move beyond the traditional close reading approach and look at the text from a new perspective. These perspectives include (but are certainly not limited to) any one of the following approaches:

1 Full text available on http://www.katherinemansfieldsociety.org/assets/KM-Stories/MISS-BRILL1920.pdf

Sigmund Freud, 1926. Source: Wikimedia Commons
“THAT’S AN AWFUL LOT TO MAKE ONE WORD MEAN”: APPLYING LITERARY THEORY IN THE SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

A Freudian approach to Miss Brill
The story is essentially a case study in unconscious repression. Miss Brill represses both her desire for companionship and the sadness of her own situation.

We witness classic repressive actions, such as her:
- sublimation: “not sad exactly – something gentle”
- projection: “something funny about them”
- transference of emotions to her fox fur
- dreamwork: dealing with unconscious desires through fantasy.

In conclusion, Miss Brill has failed to successfully negotiate her own Oedipal complex, and has an unhealthy id/superego balance.

Other texts that lend themselves particularly well to Freudian analysis include William Golding’s Lord of the Flies, Sylvia Plath’s Daddy, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and the collective works of the Brontë sisters.

Structuralism and post-structuralism

Structuralism is a fascinating field originating in the linguistic studies of Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 1990s. It appeals particularly to those logical-minded students who might normally struggle to come to grips with the imprecision of traditional literary analysis. If they really get into it, they could even have the opportunity to draw little tables and diagrams in their English essays, instantly upping the cool factor of the subject as a whole.

It aims to break all literature down into a series of structures or codes, thereby rendering the dissected product completely ordinary, understandable and replicable.

Structuralists completely ignore the moral or didactic implications of literature, focusing solely on how a text has been constructed. This is achieved through:
- Relating the text to a larger containing structure or set of conventions (universal narrative, genre, form, pattern of motifs)
- Interpreting literature in terms of underlying parallels in the structure of language itself
- Treating language and literature as nothing more than a “system of signs” (semiotics) which is decoded by the reader.

Post-Structuralism is a further development of structuralism which acknowledges the place of culture. Roland Barthes identified five literary codes for dividing texts:
- Proairetic code: provides indications of action (story)
- Hermeneutic code: poses questions to provide suspense (plot)
- Connotative or Semic code: connotations inherent in word choices (style and character)
- Cultural code: contains references to “common knowledge” beyond the text
- Symbolic code: basic binary polarities in the text (theme)

Essentially, post-structuralists comb texts looking for parallels, echoes, reflections, repetitions, and contrasts. They aim to analyse plot, character, motive, setting and theme in terms of the pattern that has been used to create them.

A post-structuralist approach to Miss Brill
Miss Brill is considered a single utterance within the “language” of literature, and the “dialect” of short stories in general, and Katherine Mansfield’s stories in particular. A large number of Mansfield’s stories, for example, are concerned with the Burnell and Sheridan families, so readers gain deeper understanding of each story in terms of the others.

Miss Brill is similar to Bliss in that it conveys a dramatic shift in feeling for its main character, during a single scene.

The story is structured around a series of binary oppositions, which pervade its theme, characters, setting, style and plot. Some of these include male/female, youth/old age, energy/lethargy, talking/silence, light/dark, companionship/loneliness.

Structuralist analysis is a broad theory, but can be undertaken in bite-sized pieces. I have recently completed a basic structuralist analysis of Romeo and Juliet with a lower band Year 10 class, and found that it made the text considerably more accessible and appealing.
A particularly fun activity to complete with any text is searching through it to identify the spheres of action (character types) and functions (plot events) that Vladimir Propp identified as being the basic building blocks of any story. You should be able to find a list of these with a quick Google search.

New Historicism

New historicists read literary texts as offering insight into the specific social or historical context in which they were written.

While we may quite regularly provide students with background information about a social or historical context as part of a text study, we would probably still be focusing our study on the text itself and the thematic lessons we can take from it. New Historicism is a rather different form of reading in that it is the context itself, rather than the text, which is of primary importance.

New historicists use literature as a tool to scrutinise social norms, values and behaviours or a period or place, focusing particularly on power struggles within the society and how power is instituted and upheld. Concepts like propaganda, patriarchy, Michel Foucault’s “discursive processes” and Jeremy Bentham’s notion of the panopticon are frequently utilised in new historicist readings.

New historicists read by:

- Juxtaposing a literary text with a non-literary text (eg. A diary or newspaper article) from the same period/place and reading them side by side
- Refusing to privilege the literary over the non-literary, and analysing both in equal depth
- Attempting to “defamiliarise” canonical literature and deliberately ignoring all previous scholarly readings or criticisms of a text.

To read Miss Brill from a new historicist perspective, I have analysed it alongside an article from The Times (London), 1921, entitled The Modern Girl: Mrs Kendal’s Stern Criticism. (www.timesonline.co.uk)

A new historicist approach to Miss Brill

Miss Brill can be aligned with Mrs Kendal, in that they both work to enforce patriarchal structures and conservative behaviours within their society.

Miss Brill is critical of others’ clothing and actions: “wanted to shake” the Englishwoman for refusing to accept her husband’s advice. She wasn’t sure what to think of the woman who throws away the bouquet – both Miss Brill and Mrs Kendal are blindly propagating the rules of society without being able to think for themselves when the situation does not clearly match their accepted social dictates. Miss Brill is thus both prison warden and prisoner to social norms.

She is contrasted with the unnamed girl at the end of the story – the only figure not afraid to voice her own opinion. It is interesting that this character is not given a name in the world of the story – society does not value those who don’t play by the rules.

What is broadly termed “literary theory” encompasses a range of new philosophies, approaches and thoughts on literature. Depending on your own preferences and the needs of your students, you may wish to look at texts through one or more social or technical approaches. These range from Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism to Feminist, Marxist or Queer theory, Postcolonialism to Deconstruction, Postmodernism or Stylistics. The danger is in oversimplification, so it is important to be conversant with the details of the theory before introducing students to its use.

There are so many reading strategies and approaches out there that you should really never again have to answer the question: “Why do we do the same thing again and again in English?”

Sian Evans has published a textbook on the use of literary theory in the secondary English classroom. “Through the Literary Looking Glass” is available from the New Zealand Association for Teachers of English: nzate.co.nz