***Unpacking Discourse and Ideology in Texts – A Deconstructionist Approach***

In order to **unpack the ideologies** of, say, fairytales we could examine the binary oppositions which structure the elements of the text. The structuralist theorist, Chandler, suggests that binary oppositions are *“pairs of mutually-exclusive signifiers representing categories which are logically opposed but together define a complete universe of discourse”*. One group thus cannot exist without the other. For example, in order for there to be beautiful, there must also be ugly. Thus, in order to privilege beauty, ugliness must be undermined. Now debunked historical text-centred approaches suggested binary oppositions support the preferred reading, as the qualities ascribed to the ‘good’ characters reveal society’s values. In Cinderella, beauty, marriage and passive obedience are privileged over ugliness, being unmarried and aggressive. The following table lists the major binary oppositions found within “Cinderella”.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***Privileged*** | ***Marginalised*** |
| Beautiful | Ugly |
| Married | Single |
| Innocent/Good | Evil |
| Noble | Common |
| Humble | Proud |
| Cheerful | Quarrelsome |
| Male Dominance | Female submission |
| Modest | Vain |

These dualisms illustrate the privileged and marginalized attributes, representing the hierarchy of values prevalent in the patriarchal society. From the perspective of **contemporary theorists**, binary oppositions help **uncover concealed ideologies** within the text, namely the *“inferiorized other”* (Hourihan, 1997). This supports post-structuralist perspectives, suggesting that **even the most seemingly innocent text is opinionated and prejudiced**. By identifying these *“polarities”* we can begin to unravel the internalised ideologies within the text.

Discourses mobilized within texts are constructed within discourses, and do not offer “*neutral descriptions*” (Moon, 2001) of society or the world. They shed light on the inherent ideologies encoded within the text, which are “*insidiously powerful”* (Hourihan, 1997), passing on pervasive ideological messages. Through the mobilization of discourses, texts privilege some world views over others. By identifying the discourses internalized within a text, and observing those which are dominant, **the text’s ideologies become further apparent**. The following table shows the discourses prevalent in the fairytale Cinderella and the way in which they were mobilized.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Discourse** | **Depicted through text** |
| Romantic Discourse | * The prince’s search for a wife; Cinderella’s willingness to marry for love
* The prince falls in love with Cinderella almost instantly and couldn’t eat as he was too engrossed just “looking at her”
 |
| Gender Discourse (Beauty) | * Cinderella described using adjectives like “unparalleled goodness”, “sweetness of temper”, “pretty”, “patient”, “beautiful”, “slender”, “lovely”, etc..
* All unlovable characters such as stepmother and stepsisters, described as “odious”, “ugly”, “proud”, “haughty”, “rude”, “uncivil”, “mean”, “vain”, etc.…
* The stepsisters only apologize for their ill-treatment of C after they discovered she was the beautiful princess.
* The prince falls in love with her because of her beauty and charm.
* The king and queen admire her and want her to marry their son simply because of her “beauty”.
 |
| Class/Status Discourse | * All the young women want to marry the prince simply because he is a “prince” and “rich”.
* Cinderella’s “rags” used to emphasis her lack of eligibility to go to the ball, to marry the prince, etc...
* When Cinderella goes to the ball, emphasis is on the clothes she wears, the material, headpiece, etc…
 |

Resistant reading of the text occurs when a contemporary world-context centred approach is adopted. *“By penetrating the disguises of the text… [****Deconstructionist*** *critics] may engage in radical re-readings of familiar classics”* (Appleton, 2000), **teasing out the inherent discourses submersed within the text. Once identified, the ideologies can be challenged and subverted**, in order to express a contrasting point of view.

The following table depicts the ideologies underpinning, “Cinderella”, and the ways in which these ideological messages are foregrounded.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Ideology** | **Depicted through text** |
| Beautiful women are desirable and should be married | * The prince wants Cinderella as his wife purely due to her beauty and charm (they had only just met).
* The king and queen want her to marry their son because she is beautiful.
 |
| Women need to be “saved” and protected | * Cinderella must be taken away from her servant’s life at home by marrying the prince.
* The mice make Cinderella a beautiful dress so that she can go to the ball.
* The fairy godmother transforms her rags into a beautiful ball gown and provides a beautiful carriage for her to go to the ball.
 |
| Females must be passive, obedient and subordinate to males. | * Cinderella always follows her step-family’s orders without complaint, always displaying them with kindness.
* She obeyed the fairy “immediately”.
* Cinderella never makes decisions for herself. The stepmother says she can go to the ball IF she gets all her work done. The fairy godmother tells her she WILL go to the ball but be home by twelve. The prince says she will marry him and she does.
 |
| Women should carry out domestic duties. | * Cinderella lives as a servant in her own home, forced by her step-family.
* She cooks, cleans, sews, washes, nurtures, feeds, irons, mends, scrubs, etc… she carries out all the domestic duties in the household on her own
 |
| Higher status means desirable husband | * Every woman would love to marry the prince and attend the grand ball as he is rich, wealthy and of royal status.
 |
| Women must be loved and provided for by men | * Cinderella’s father dies, leaving her to be forced into slavery without a man to protect her anymore.
* Cinderella eventually marries the prince, who will be able to provide for all her needs.
 |

**Resistant world-context-centred approaches thus advocate *“pushing against the depth and complexity until the full implications and the contradictions inevitably inherent in them, become apparent”*** (Lye).

Unpacking binaries is **only one way** to reveal the ideologies underpinning the discourses in a text. Other strategies include: semiotic and myth analysis; narratology (looking at text structure e.g. the hero’s journey); and noticing gaps, silences, incoherences and contradictions (ideological hotspots). Theorists ask questions, and employ terms, concepts and other resistant reading strategies in order to read texts resistantly.

**Unpacking Discourse and Ideology in a text** (using John Foulcher’s poem *Harry Wood*.)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Harry Wood by John Foulcher**Harry Wood **worked in the mines**, digging his way out **of poverty**, findingin his twentiesan empty **foreman’s** place.Once, he told us, **he fired a man**For fooling with the ropes, and **the union**went out for weeks. He held on though, and they sankback to the sleek **coal caves**one man short,breathing again the air invisible from the rock.And one time collapsingthe moment he started, the mine nearly took him,he heard them say, **“*Wood’s gone*”**as the shovels rattled in the earth. | Now he’s bought the farm,and every year before markethe **herds the steers in by himself**,**pricks at their tubs of meat with a current charged bar****until they panic**and take the long unbroken slope creaking into the truck.Kangaroo bones**pocked with skin** and **maggot bubbles of flesh**edge the house and the yard.At night, he sitsand talks of the mines, **stares at the dark window** – when he’s dead,the farm will go to his grandchildren,and they won’t be pooras he was, and they’ll have time, he believes,for something more than survival. |

**Deconstructing text by analysing binary oppositions:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***Privileged*** | ***Marginalised*** |
| above | below |
| wealth | poverty |
| unyielding (Harry) | submissive (workers) |
| kindness | cruelty |
| society/fellowship | loneliness |
| beauty | ugliness |
| light | dark |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Discourse** | **Depicted through text** |
| Class | *‘worked’, ‘digging his way out of poverty’, ‘foreman’, ‘he fired a man’, ‘union’, “Wood’s gone”, ‘bought the farm’* |
| Psychological/Moral | *‘he held on’, ‘herds the steers in by himself’, ‘pricks at their tubs of meat’, ‘until they panic’, ‘pocked with skin and maggot bubbles of flesh’, ‘stares at the dark window’, ‘time…for something more than survival’.* |
| **Ideology** | **Depicted through text** |
| Real men need to be hard working and tough | Harry’s hard work and determination allow him to become a foreman and to earn enough money to buy a farm.**But is this Harry’s ideology or the poet’s ideology?** |
| Men would benefit from being kind to their fellow humans and to nature.  | Harry’s lack of kindness to others, including his farm animals, has led to a lonely and spiritually arid life in retirement. The poet uses inference (‘Wood’s gone’), evaluative language (‘maggot bubbles of flesh’), symbolism (‘stares at the dark window’), together with binaries (cruel/kind, ugliness/beauty), to construct this meaning. **Is this the ideology underpinning the text?** |

It is difficult to read “Harry Wood” resistantly because the poet is already critiquing the accepted ideology (hard working, tough) around what it means to be an Australian man. The poet does not mention women but this underscores the meaning constructed in the poem. This ‘silencing’ of women is probably deliberate. They seem to mean little to Harry. A gender theorist might object to the negative stereotype of a working man that has been constructed in the text. You need to look for a different angle is your text is already resisting dominant discourses. E.g. *The Natural Way of Thing*. Here you might ask if the representation of a particular female character is a positive role model for young women or if the representations of men in the novel is fair and just.