Final draft – student achieved VHA 5 overall. This probably awarded A or A- Lacks sophistication.

More detailed applications of theory to text and references to text required.

Introduction

In Western society, the values and attitudes we once held to be true and equitable are changing. We begin to refute the values once upheld by society, and replace them with more socially acceptable ideologies. For example, slavery was once seen as an acceptable practice but is now rejected by society as unjust and inhumane. However, whilst the values of the modern world progressively change, socially unacceptable ideologies may still be passed on from one group of people to another through the cultural practices in which we engage, such as reading literary texts. *“A large part of any book is written not by the author but by the world in which the author lives.”* (Hollindale, 1988, as cited in Hourihan 1997) Therefore, historical works of literature inevitably transmit the values and attitudes from the time in which they were written on to succeeding generations; the reader subconsciously absorbs these values and attitudes as ‘natural truths’. Hence, historical works of literature are often problematized by contemporary literary critics because of the dated and now socially unacceptable ideology and discourses found within them.

Contemporary literary theory argues that “*no text is innocent: all stories are ideological” (*Hourihan, 1997) and that all texts ‘*invite readers to read in certain ways’* (Johnson, 2001). Also, every reading of a text can be said to be a “*rewriting*” (Derrida, 1978 as cited in Pope, 1995) in that each time a text is read, the reader may produce different meanings, and thus the text is‘re*-written’*. Furthermore, a text can be read in three fundamental ways. An historical, text-centred approach to reading is to ‘read with the text’ and thus to accept the invited meaning. A second approach is to read across the text so that the reading is in slight disagreement with the invited meaning but ultimately complies with it. The third, poststructuralist approach is to read ‘against the text’ by objecting to, and resisting, the invited reading. Stemming from this approach, it is argued that “*the best way to understand how a text works is to change it*.” (Pope, 1995). When the text is deconstructed, the fundamental ideology underpinning it, and thus being absorbed by the reader, can be unpacked. To achieve a complex transformation, a fundamental shift in the ideologies, values and viewpoints embedded with the text must occur, thus allowing the reader to formulate a more socially acceptable reading

I have applied this transformative process to the poem “*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*” written by John Keats in 1819 because the poem is embedded with traditional patriarchal ideologies about the roles of men and women in a relationship, the importance of beauty, and the view that sensual and seductive women are evil and unnatural. The text describes the misadventures of a knight who is seduced by an archetypal *femme fatale* who heartlessly abandons him.

In my complex transformation, the sexist ideologies within the base text are directly opposed and the text is altered on both a micro-linguistic and macro-linguistic level. In order to deconstruct the text, I have applied a feminist, world-context centred approach, which refutes the patriarchal, sexist discourse promoted in the base text.

Invited Reading

An historical text-centred approach, such as New Criticism, emphasises that meanings can be created solely from the “*words on the page*” (QSA, 2011) and therefore does not problematise or object to the meaning privileged in the text. It simply accepts the invited meaning. Often a New Critical approach utilises a structuralist methodology whereby “*complex systems, or structures*” (Moon, 2004) are unproblematically analysed to create meaning within the text.

In “*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*”, the notion that women who display their sexuality and emotions are destructive and wicked is privileged. The woman is depicted as an evil archetypal femme *fatale* who seduces the knight with love and affection only to leave him abandoned on a “*cold hill side*”. This is shown through the ‘inverted’ conventional narrative structure of the poem, as the text begins at the denouement rather than the orientation. Despite this unconventional structure, the sequence of events that lead to knight’s abandonment is made clear. The orientation depicts the woman as a caring and sensual person but the complication is created when the woman “*lulled”* the knight to sleep, before abandoning him, thus demonstrating her deliberate callousness. Furthermore, Keats’ positions the reader to view the story from a male perspective as the story is told by a male to another male, encompassing only the knight’s viewpoint. The reader therefore sympathises with the heartbroken male, and is inclined to view the woman negatively. Also, the woman is not named, which further adds to the sense of mystery and danger surrounding her. It also helps to silence the woman’s perspective as she is described as an object rather than as a person. Additionally, the language techniques used, particularly symbolism and imagery, support the idea that the woman is destructive. The passage that refers to the woman sitting upon the knights “*pacing steed*” shows a clear phallic symbol, representing the sexual desire the flirtatious woman evokes. Moreover, the use of the term “*elfin grot*” symbolises the woman’s sexuality, as if she were deliberately tempting and luring the knight. The representation of the woman picking “*honey wild, and manna-dew*” connotes an image of her as natural, and untameable. Overall, the invited reading is obviously embedded with sexist ideology.

Unpacking Ideology

Historically, the ideologies and discourses presented in a text were naturalised. The ‘*grand narrative’* of western society was not problematized or refuted; rather, it was seen to ‘capture’ the complex social structures and customs of the time (Moon, 1992). The postmodern school of thought, however, began to actively resist the “*singular, fixed meanings and interpretations*” (Moon, 1992) within texts. It sought to subvert the dominant ways of thinking, and allow for a broader field of interpretation. Similarly, poststructuralism argued deconstruction of the universal truths and systems of meaning within texts was necessary to formulate alternative meanings.

Stemming from this contemporary approach to literary criticism is the world-context-centred approach where the underpinning question is: “Whose interests are served by the representations in texts?” (QSA 2010) In the case of feminist theory, the primary concern is the ways in which “*literature reinforces the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women*”. (Weedon 1997) The feminist school of thought argues that gender inequalities privileged in texts are reproduced by both the structure and language of the text and also the reading practices used (Moon). As such, *“feminists have placed the subjectivity, signifying practices and sexuality on the theoretical agenda”* (Weedon 1997)

Appling a feminist theory to the poem demonstrates how the reader is encouraged to submissively “*accept the way the world is as natural and inevitable”* (Pope 2001). In doing this, the cultural discourses underpinning texts which reflect the systematized subjugation and exploitation of women can be unearthed (Millet 1969) Thus, the poem can be re-invented and re-visioned from a less patriarchal viewpoint.

To deconstruct the text, and reveal the underlying meanings, the structural features and techniques of the poem were analysed. One such textual feature is the use of binary oppositions, which are “*patterns of opposing features and concepts.*” (Moon 1992) Historically, binary oppositions were seen to be “*stable and distinct*” (QSA 2010) and the values underpinning them were considered to be natural. However, contemporary, post-structural theorists such as Jacques Derrida believe that binary oppositions are far from natural or stable, despite being naturalised by the reader (King 2005). It is also asserted that binaries are “*mutually exclusive alternatives*” (Herrett 2003) whereby one side of the binary is privileged over the other. Furthermore, third wave feminists such as Kate Millet oppose “*mechanisms”*, such as binary oppositions, as “*covert ways of manipulating power so as to establish and perpetuate the dominance of men and the subordination of women*” (Barry, 2009) Similarly, feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir argues that the “*othering*” of women in texts results from the use of patriarchal binary oppositions, where the woman is negatively portrayed. This is true of the binaries used in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”; the woman is marginalized and decentred.

The most evident dualisms present in “*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*” include: reason versus emotion, nature versus civilisation, and self-control and rationality versus sexuality and libido. The overarching binary opposition of the poem, however, is the male versus female dualism, which all other dualisms can be classified into. By depicting the woman as irrational and emotional, whilst depicting the male as noble and virtuous, a sexist dualism has been created from which the male is unequivocally dominant and the woman is silenced.

Another method to further deconstruct the fundamental ideology of the text is to apply a poststructuralist sign-system approach. This stemmed from Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic theory. Saussure acknowledged that there was a “*basic divide between language and what language meant*” (King 2005) He argued that words “*mean*” things, other than their literal definition, because of an “*assumed and broadly agreed relation*” amongst those who share the ideologies underpinning signs (Pope 2001) Saussure identifies this as a sign-system, whereby a signifier points to the signified to create meaning. King (2005) states that “*the signifier can be anything such as words or a picture that indicates or points”* to the signified. King also postulates that the signified is the multitude of “*different interpretations (meanings) or mental pictures*” that the signifier evokes.

The poststructuralist approach to signs differentiates from Saussure’s theory in a number of fundamental ways. Poststructuralism takes from the Saussurean sign-system that individual signs do not have intrinsic meanings, rather they acquire meaning through their relationship to other signs within a sign-system. However, Derrida postulates that the Saussurean approach does not account for the “*plurality of meaning or changes of meaning*” over time. For example, the Saussurean approach cannot explain why the signifier “*woman*” can have conflicting meanings which change over time (Weedon 1997). The poststructuralist methodology instead emphasises that signifiers operate in a discursive context; that is, the meaning of the signifiers is dependent on the discourse in which it is presented.

The signifier is separated into two categories: the denotation or the connotation. Denotation is the literal definition of the words, whilst the connotation is the non-literal association the word evokes within the reader. Upon applying this semiotic approach to “*La Belle Dame Sans Merci”*, I was able to unearth a number of signs that constructed meaning in the poem. The woman is described as “*wild*”, “*strange*” and as a “*faery’s child*”. These emotive words act as signifiers, with the signified denotation being that of a mysterious, mystical creature. The signified connotation is that of an untameable mistress who is both devious and destructive.

The theory of myth is closely associated with semiotics, which is vital in unpacking the ideology of any text. Barthes (1957 as cited in King et. al.) describes myths as “*certain stories and images (that) shape our perception of reality”*. These myths are “*omnipresent signs which impose upon us the belief that something simply goes without saying*.”(Hourihan 1997) Additionally, Moon (1992) describes the “mythic *level of meaning in a text*” as a “*pre-packaged set of beliefs and practices that seems natural and obvious to members of a culture*”. These myths rely on the use of combinations of signs to invite readers to “*activate or recognise the myth*” (Hourihan 1997). Numerous sexist myths are evident in my base text. There is a strong mythological association attached to the idea of femininity. The poem constructs the myth that a socially acceptable woman should be submissive to male desire and should be passive in her dealings with men. These myths furthermore exemplify the sexist, patriarchal discourse presented in the poem, which the reader is encouraged to accept.

Transformation:

In constructing a complex transformation of “*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*”, it is necessary to make available in the rewritten text alternative or resistant readings, other than those presented in the base text. To construct this alternative or resistant reading, I first made a discursive shift. Subsequently, an alteration of the ideology presented in the text occurred. It is the sexist and misogynistic ideology in the base text that I wished to denounce in my rewriting. The transformed text thus focuses on the ideology that women are of equal status to men, and should not be objectified as sexual beings.

The reader can be positioned to agree with this socially acceptable ideology by changing the base text on a both “macro” and “micro-linguistic” (Pope, 1995) level. “Macro” linguistic changes may include alterations to the genre, discourse, structure and medium in which the text is presented. Micro-linguistics focuses on changing the vocabulary in the base text. Alterations from simple vocabulary to complex or figurative to literal are examples of such changes.

I needed to use careful consideration when altering the binary oppositions within the text. ‘Flipping’ the binaries to make the previously marginalised discourse dominant (Johnson, 2001) has an adverse effect to the transformation process. Hourihan (1997) states that “*If you simply turn it (a binary opposition)on its head, it is still a dualism*”. Thus, I needed to ensure that I did not simply depict the male as destructive and the woman as rational, as this would still privilege one gender over another.

I determined that to create a discursive shift, I needed to depict both genders in a neutral way, abstaining from privileging one over the other. To this end, I associated an equal level of emotional sensitivity and rationality with both characters. As such, the stereotypical binary that women are emotional and men are rational has been removed. At first I countered the dualism of the woman as emotional and the male as rational by making the knight emotionally sensitive and slightly erratic in his behaviour and the woman as coherent and balanced. However, this still retained the binary, thus preventing a complex and full transformation of the base text. Instead, I have emphasised that emotional sensitivity does not equate to a loss in rational behaviour by equalising the level of emotion and reason both characters have.

The genre and time period of *“La Belle Dame Sans Merci”* were also changed. The genre of romantic poetry naturalises the gender discourse of the base text, that a woman is inferior to a man. To correct this, the transformed text was distanced from the conventional narrative structure used in romantic poetry. Therefore, the reader is not inclined accept the naturalised ideology that women should be submissive to men. Initially, I had planned to transform the text into a narration of the psychological counselling session. However, this proved problematic, as the transformed text would still retain the conventional narrative structure used in the base text. Instead, I transformed the text into an official medical document. This thereby disrupts what Jauss would call the reader’s *“horizon of expectation” (?)*in that no closure or predictably is granted by the structure of the text.

In addition, the discourse is changed to a medical discourse within a psychology report. This medical discourse depicts the woman as being professional and rational whilst within the previous romantic discourse, the woman is depicted as being sexually deviant and wild. Furthermore, the woman is no longer overshadowed by the male. The report is written from her perspective, and she is given a name, Dr. Laura Belle, thus she is no longer silenced.

On a micro linguistic level, I have altered the language used from emotive and descriptive to scientific and informative. The base text used expressive and vivid words to describe the woman such as “*wild*” and “*strange*”. These signifiers created the signified image of a destructive *femme fatale*. By changing the vocabulary to be scientific, rather than emotive, I have eliminated the negative connotations created of the woman.

Overall, my transformed text of *“La Belle Dame Sans Merci”* aimed to subvert the sexist invited reading of the base text. This was achieved through a discursive shift, thus resulting in a new gender ideology, where the dualism of the male as dominant and woman as submissive no longer exists. In doing so, my readers no longer subconsciously absorb the patriarchal ideology of the base text as natural; they are instead presented with an invited reading that is no longer imbedded with socially unacceptable ideologies.

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**Points to note**

**This is a draft response from around 2010. It is a useful starting point for understanding the steps required in achieving a complex transformation. You could use the “Say Something” reading strategy: (You would need to modify in order to deconstruct this defence. I have asked students to comment on and critique the paragraph structure and ideas, for instance.)**

**What is the Say Something strategy?**

The Say Something strategy (Gaither, 1997) can be used in a number of ways, including engaging students in reading class materials. Buehl (2013) gives an example of how this could work for History students reading a textbook passage about life during the Great Depression:

1. Put students into pairs.
2. Student 1 reads the first paragraph aloud while Student 2 follows along and listens.
3. When the first paragraph has been read aloud, Student 2 must say something about what Student 1 read e.g., comment on something interesting, make a prediction, wonder about something that was said ("I wonder..."), identify confusing information, relate information from the paragraph to personal experience.
4. Students switch roles and Student 2 reads the next paragraph, and the process continues.

**Advantages**

1. Students are continually reminded that reading involves a mental conversation between an author and a reader; both need to contribute to the conversation if the reader’s comprehension is to occur.
2. Students are provided with cues that guide them into accessing implicit layers of meaning that necessitate inferential thinking.
3. Students verbalize their understandings as they sum up what they have gained from their reading.
4. More interactive so students are less inclined to switch off.
5. Opportunity to practice reading fluency.
6. Stimulates conversation.
7. Noise level provides privacy to students who might feel self-conscious.

ed greater cohesion.