

## CRITICAL INQUIRY

Unlike a rhetorical analysis or stylistic analysis, critical inquiry moves beyond simply searching for metaphors and other literary nuances in writing. Critical inquiry is the practice of finding "deeper meanings and substance" within the text. Sounds like some esoteric navel-gazing; however, in reality, critical inquiry helps us to gain more insight into the text than may be possible beyond a simple surface reading.

Surface? Well, yes. You see, texts are like onions. They have layers. On the top layer is the text and the immediate message you receive.

Below the surface are other layers which help us to understand things about the author, the context of writing the text, the meaning of the text within its own time and space, ideological themes which might be present, and even the biases in the text.

Read this short passage:

Alex has a pet snake, which he constantly begs his mother to take to Church with him. His mother does not agree that Church is a place for animals. Alex attempting to reason with his mom says, "Church is a place for all of God's creatures, mom." However, with a stern gesture, she retorts, "Church is not a place for slithering serpents, and it is a place of peace."

### CRITICAL "READINGS"

Now, let's look at the layers. As a critic, you can have a few different "readings" or interpretations of this text...

There is the surface reading: This passage is about a boy who wants to bring his pet to church, although his mother won't let him.

Now, below the surface are a few (what we call) "tensions":

For example, why might the author use a snake instead of a dog or a cat? What is the significance of this animal? What do you think? Does the author use this creature deliberately?

Well, in fact, yes. The author chose the "snake" deliberately. Why? Well, if you think about the traditional symbolism of snakes in Christian-Judao-Islamic, most of this symbolism is negative. Think of the serpent in the Garden of Eden in Christian-Judao cultures, and think of the snake in Islamic cultures found with the classic narrative of Mohammed and the Snake.

Yet, simply reading the text for its surface feature would never have brought such thoughts to our attention. In a sense, using critical inquiry may help us to understand more about the text than we may realize.

For example, sometimes, authors make deliberate choices in order to produce "tensions." These tensions sometimes are easily equated to traditional symbols or circumstances which we can associate to our own cultures as being positive or negative or having some other significance.

### CONSIDER POWER

One possible "reading": Ask yourself, are there power conflicts within the piece? Who has the power or authority in this passage? And, whose power is dismissed (that is, who is weaker)? Is there some sort of hierarchy occurring, and what might it be based on?

Asking these questions helps us to understand that Alex is the weaker of the two characters. His mother is stronger; the mother has power over Alex.

Sometimes, authors make deliberate power-conflicts between characters in order to create tension.

In some cases, these tensions or power struggles are related to issues of gender, race, or other traditional structures, such as the caste system in India or the class system in other parts of the world. People are paired against others in structures relating to family structures, religious hierarchies, business hierarchies, etc.

In this text, the author chooses a situation in which the younger weaker character challenges the older stronger character using words and logic not braun. However, this situation creates a unique tension which we can explore in other ways.

### CONSIDER CLASS AND SOCIAL STATUS

Some critics claim that these power relations are deeply embedded in issues of money. And, if you think about it, this notion may be true: Consider that females do not make as much money as males. Or, minorities do not make as much as the status quo (in many areas). Further, consider issues of education and privilege.... Educated people tend to make more money than others. In a sense, looking at power (through the idea of money) lends us to other "readings" of the passage.

Back to our passage, ask yourself: Who makes more money? The mother. Therefore, who has more power? The mother.

Some critics use structures identified by Karl Marx to further understand the plight of characters within these power relations and monetary structures. Further, they ask how money is use to control societal things like religion, legal structures, and social systems.

In the case of Alex and his mother, it is obvious that the power of the mother (made possible by having money) is used to overthrow the religious beliefs of the boy (which seem, under the circumstances, more valid). Further, you can ask yourself, would the mother be embarrassed by bringing a snake to church? What does she have to lose? Such questions inform this Marxist perspective.

### CONSIDER GENDER AND STRUCTURE

Another possible "reading" of the text involves the issue of gender. Ask yourself, how are women portrayed in this passage? How are men portrayed in this passage?

Well, the mother is in a position of authority over the son, Alex. Some critics believe that a woman's role versus a man's role in the text may be significant. For example, in mainstream society, women are often seen as lesser than equal (traditionally). However, in this passage, the boy is below the mother, yet he challenges her authority by positing the religious ethic of having compassion for all living things. Yet, she is not convinced, asserting her authority on him. Now, ask yourself: What does this situation say about traditional gender roles and even

contemporary gender roles. Heck, what does this passages say about parenting roles? Is the mother's behavior reinforcing particular stereotypes about women and parental behavior? What types of commentary can be made about her assertion that such an action (such as bring the snake to church) would violate religious ethics or morals?

### CONSIDER PSYCHOANALYTICS

In some cases, authors create tensions without deliberately realizing that they are happening. In many cases, we must assume that the author really did not know about tension, since he/she might not have known about it until later in writing the story. Therefore, there is another critical "reading" which may be applied: One which focuses on the psychoanalytical properties of the content. Ask yourself, did the author deliberately choose a snake? If so, why choose a snake? Moreover, why choose the situation (a son bringing his pet to church and seeking to defy his mother's wishes by changing them with the very faith that she is trying to protect).

Psychoanalysts and Jungian scholars have proposed that texts are much like dreams and fantasies that we have. In a sense, the characters and circumstances within a text have alternative properties, similar to the concept of connotation and denotation.

EX:

Let's say that I had a bad day at work. Later that night, I had a dream that I was a whale, swimming with a group of whales, and they suddenly left me. Then, in the dream, a huge shark tried to eat me.

If I went to a psychoanalyst or a Jungian psychologist, they might consider my current plight (rough times at work) and work towards interpreting my dreams. The analyst might tell me that: I am afraid that my coworkers might hide in their cubicles in the middle of a crisis, and I may have to face the boss on my own, even though I was only acting as part of the group.

This interpretation comes from the gathering of potential symbols and figuring out their meaning in my real life. For example, the other whales are representative of my coworkers. The shark is representative of my boss/manager. Because the other whales leave me to take on a shark alone, I find myself in a precarious position of being alone to face a foe. This situation might be representative of my coworkers leaving me to face my boss/manager. You can see the similarities and how they are interestingly related.

Well, some psychoanalysts and Jungian scholars suggest that all text contain some sort of reading based on the possibility that things in texts somehow related to things in the real life of the author.

### CONSIDER FREUD

Some scholars have even suggested that many of these interpretations are related to deeply embedded conflicts with parents, loved ones, friends, and others. Some have even suggested that many texts focus on deeply personal levels, dealing with issues of childhood trauma, abuse, and even sexual difference.

For example, the famed Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud claimed that men wanted their mothers sexually (something he called the Oedipus Complex) and that women wanted to be like their fathers and take the place of their mothers (something he called the Electra Complex).

He used these "complexes" and others to understand the curious behavior trends observed in his patients (men with divergent sexual appetites, and women who could not get along with their

mothers - but were easily at ease with their fathers). In any case, Freud claimed that particular symbols stood things which had sexual functions and power relationships attached to them.

Freud and others might suggest, in the case of the Snake, that its elongated shape and general girth present it as a phallus. In holding true to Freud's theories, the boy asking to his mother to consider his snake to go with them to church might be strangely related to the boy's interest in his mother... in a sense, perhaps (as Freud might suggest), he wants to share his phallus with his mother.

Now, I know what you are thinking... this seems like a stretch... and, an R-rated stretch at that... but, in some cases, it seems strangely plausible.

Consider this: In William Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, many scholars have supposed that Hamlet and his mother share a more precarious (and somewhat incestuous) relationship (alluding to the possibility of an Oedipal structure). There is a scene where Hamlet and his mother meet in her bedroom, and he expresses his dislike for his mother's new husband (who consequently happens to be Hamlet's uncle... speaking of incestuous, pretty weird, huh?).

Well, as the scene progresses, Hamlet (a grown man) seeks solace from his mother (an older woman). Here, ask yourself: Honestly, does a grown man need to seek solace from his mother? Hamlet has a girlfriend. So, we find it strange that he goes to his mother.

Anyway, he kills another man (Polonius) who is hiding behind a curtain with his sword. Then, he proceeds to continue to be consoled by his mother until he scolds her for marrying the father's brother. In Fransco Ziffirilli's Oscar-nominated, film adaptation of Hamlet, the director exaggerates these overtones by having Hamlet (Mel Gibson) almost rape his mother (Glenn Close) and end with a very uncomfortable kiss.

Changing directions... here is another strangely plausible case: Victor Nabakov's novel, Lolita, explores some strange sexual tension between the novel's main character, Humbert (an older man), and a 12-year old girl Dolores.

After his wife dies tragically, Humbert moves into a house owned by Charlotte Haze (who develops a strong infatuation with Humbert). Despite Haze's intentions, Humbert becomes sexually attracted to her daughter, Dolores. When Haze discovers Humbert's attention switching towards Dolores, Haze sends Dolores away to a boarding school. Yet, when Haze dies, Humbert reunites with and continues to pursue Dolores.

The situation is similar to the Electra concept discussed by Freudian scholars, where the Father (or in this case, a father-figure) is pursued by a daughter (in this case, a step-daughter).

### CONSIDER BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

In most respects, the author of a text is very important to understanding the text itself. For example, knowing that William Shakespeare was a playwright helps us to understand how he survived the black plague, which was ravishing Europe during his time. We know that he survived, because as a performer he would have toured the countryside putting on performances (his mobility is most likely what spared his life and the lives of his fellow performers). Moreover, understanding that particular authors used drugs to inspire their prose helps us to account for their warped senses of reality as well as their masterful creativity....

A good critic knows their work (including having an understanding of the author). Where were they born? What did they do for a living? How long did they live? What was their childhood like? Understanding these types of concerns helps us to understand further why an author made particular choices for style and content. Furthermore, understanding the author's background may help us to understand the context and meaning of the story (giving us locations and dates for the material written, which in turn helps us to understand how the culture was).

### CONSIDER AUTHORSHIP

On the other hand, there are many critics who claim that an understanding of the author is not necessarily important. Moreover, considering the author more or less may pollute the interpretation of the work. For example, if you have a brilliant actor or musician who acts like an idiot socially, people are less inclined to take his work seriously or be "turned off." On the other hand, if you pretend as though you do not know who the author is, then you are able to control your interpretation of the work.

A few philosophers has posed the question: Why is the author even important? Why not forget about them altogether? They claim: Let's just look at the work by itself. And, they do. Typically, they ask questions about what the reader or the audience thinks.

They might ask: How does this text make me feel? Is the text good? What kinds of things seem important? Does the text change my mind about anything? How does the text elicit certain reactions from the reader or the audience? What seems good about the text? What seems bad about the text? How does the text compare to other texts like it?

### CONSIDER INTERTEXTUALITY

Some recent critics have pondered the idea that "there is nothing new under the sun." In fact, they claim that everything that we know and love is, more or less, recycled. We just keep reusing things over and over again.

Case and point: The film, *The Matrix*, is more or less the traditional story of Jesus of Nazareth. Instead of Romans, you have Robots/Programs. Instead of Jesus, you have Neo. And, the references to support this notion are there: The Ship is named the Nebukanezzar, the city is called Zion, and there are several references to the plight of the Jews in Egypt (Exodus?).

What about the Terminator films? Why not put the character of John Connor into the space of Moses? Exodus, rebellion, pursuit... it's all there....

What about the number of Cinderella stories passing through our culture? A nobody becomes somebody... Consider Batman, Ironman, Chariots of Fire, Revenge of the Nerds, and others.

What about stories of revenge? How many stories of revenge do you see these days? Well, there is Hamlet, the Count of Monte Cristo, and most of the Steven Seagal or Clint Eastwood movies...

In a sense, critics and scholars have started looking for patterns in novels and films. In fact, recognizing how a story is similar or even identical to another story is now, more or less, a sport. And, to make matters worse, authors and directors are now using similarities intentionally (for artistic and even satirical reasons).

These critics ask: How might this text share similarities with another? Is the form similar to something else? Does the text pay homage to another text? What is new? What is different?

Are there any changes which seem significant? Are there things which we consider to be more or less cliché or trite (in other words, we have seen these things too much)?

Most critics will ask if the text is based on something which came before the text they are reading; however, new texts which are inspired by older texts are always subject to the same sorts of criticism.