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Literature Review of the Literary Term “Interpretation”

The literary term “interpretation” has evolved greatly throughout Western literary history to include many important factors such as etymology, specific literary time periods, literary movements, and the context in which the term is being used as discussed. In Steven Mailloux’s “Interpretation,” the reader is first introduced to the multitudinous meanings of the word “interpretation” throughout history and is presented with the changing etymology over time throughout various languages and different schools of educated thought. Mailloux explains to the reader how the literary mechanism of interpretation applies to the story of Belshazzar from the Book of Daniel and to Emily Dickinson’s poem regarding the same subject, then switches gears to a close interpretive reading of Jim’s dream interpretation in *Huckleberry Finn*, discussing how interpretation has the ability to set and change both laws or treaties put into motion by the federal government and other world powers. After grasping the basic understanding of “interpretation,” Mailloux challenges the reader to reflect on various examples of “interpretation” found in texts of literature, culminating in a final politically charged form of “interpretation” that is presented to the reader in the form of the various interpretations of the ABM Treaty with the Soviet Union in 1972. Mailloux writes that “in different ways, reading treaties, explicating poems, and interpreting scripture all involve arguments over such topics as textual meaning, authorial intention, past readings, historical contexts, and interpretive methods. All involve the rhetorical politics of interpretation (Mailloux 127).” Since 1995, the literary term

“interpretation” has taken on new meaning in the form of newer identified schools of thought in regard to literary interpretation, such as transactional literary theory pioneered by Louise Rosenblatt, understanding the danger of the single story and how it affects interpretation as detailed by Chauncey Monte-Santo, and understanding a new Rancièrian pedagogy as detailed by Kati Macaluso. While the understanding of the literary term of “interpretation” is well-suited for usage in literary discussions on the topic of Western literature, the term “interpretation” takes on a new definition when discussing indigenous Native American literature and traditional oral creation narratives and how they are interpreted in today’s world, and how interpretation pertains to recent Navajo Nation political activism.

An important form of literary interpretation that has surfaced during the research on the literary term “interpretation,” is one which, renowned educator and scholar Louise Rosenblatt calls “transactional literary theory.” According to an article published in 2009 by scholars Lewis and Ferretti, they elaborate on this literary form of “interpretation,” writing, “Rosenblatt focuses on the unique responses that occur in those moments when readers transact with a text and how the knowledge, experiences, and emotions of readers provoke associations with the words, ideas, and images that are part of the text” (Lewis 253). The scholars Lewis and Ferretti discuss the idea of “transactional literary theory” in more detail, writing “Because of this view of response, Rosenblatt makes a distinction between “text,” which she defines as the words or verbal symbols that are on paper, and the “poem,” which she describes as the work of art that a reader elicits as part of his or her transaction with a text” (Lewis 253). This clearly describes to the reader of this article the idea of a boundary between a “text,” which are imagined to be spontaneous writing put on paper from the natural thought processes of the mind, and a “poem,”

which requires deeper thought, and structures of literary conventions as to what this written piece will convey to the reader or audience.

In 2011, the idea of literary interpretation as being crucial to understanding a historical time period or literary movement is delineated in a scholarly article written by Chauncey Monte-Santo. In the article, she discusses how, in an academic setting, “the focus typically involves basic reading comprehension and summary of information... [and] such literacy instruction inhibits students’ historical reasoning and understanding” (Monte-Santo 212). Monte-Santo broadens her argument by explaining the phenomenon of the single story, as “many people tend to view history as a fixed story comprised of predetermined facts—indeed as a single story of the past (Monte-Santo 214). She elaborates on the conundrum of how in the classroom setting, many students are not away of the fact that “historical narratives are constructed from evidence that has been questioned, pieced together, and interpreted” (Monte-Santo 214), in other words, they do not understand that “the very nature of history is interpretive; as a consequence, there are multiple accounts of any historical event or issue written by people in real situations with particular interests”(Monte-Santo 213). The students’ lack of ability to engage in interpretation in the classroom settings is disturbing, as the phenomenon of the single story of a movement or people is a dangerous one, one that, according to the writings of African author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, can result in “a blinkered and stereotyped view of [a history’s or country’s] peoples and traditions” (Tunca 71). The idea of interpretation as important to both literary and historical understanding show a vital relationship between the literary text and the historical context from which that piece is written.

In 2015, Kati Macaluso, published an article in Reading Research Quarterly, in which she explains that there are two predominant theories of literary interpretation, where one emphasizes

“a close reading of text operating from an assumption, consistent with New Criticism, that meaning is contained within the text itself, and [the other] more attuned to the reader’s experience of reading the text, operating from the assumption, consistent with reader response theorists, that meaning is created as the reader transacts with text” (Macaluso 205). To garner deeper meaning from this argument and according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the New Criticism movement is defined as: “a type of literary criticism (applied especially to poetry) popular in North American and British universities from the 1940s to the 1970s, which sought to establish rigorous and objective methods of formal interpretation, paying particular attention to structural coherence achieved through the use of irony, paradox, and ambiguity” (OED). Also, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, reader-response theory is defined as: literary theory, “the response of a reader to a text, esp. as arising from the effect of cultural context and other factors on the reader's experience of the text” (OED). Macaluso puts forth an argument for a newer form of literary interpretation, one that she feels has the “potential to rethink these paradigms in ways that generate a set of more emancipatory relationships among reader, writer, teacher, and text” (Macaluso 206).

Macaluso goes on in her article to champion French philosopher Jacques Rancière whose “egalitarian and emancipatory ethics trouble the ethical implications of literary interpretation as it is typically carried out in U.S. classrooms while simultaneously offering another possibility: an explicitly ethical and emancipatory paradigm for a pedagogy of literary interpretation that I call poetic translation” (Macaluso 206). To understand the teachings of Rancière, one must refer to another article written by fellow scholar Elsa Högberg, where she details, “For Jacques Rancière, the political does not operate through laws, institutions, and organizations, but through what he terms the “redistribution” of the sensible; it is a democratic and egalitarian mode of dissent that

reorganizes a normative economy of what can be apprehended by the senses” (Högberg 731). Return to Macaluso’s article, she writes that “whereas traditional frameworks of emancipation begin from an assumption of inequality, in which individuals are emancipated, Rancière conceives of emancipation as something one does for oneself” which would naturally follow that “intellectual emancipation, then, means to act on the assumption of equality of intelligence among human beings, or the ability of all individuals to see, to think, and to speak for themselves” (Macaluso 207). Macaluso closes her creation of a new Rancièrian pedagogy as one that “believes that “the same intelligence is at work in all the productions of the human mind” and, in believing that supposition, makes that supposition a reality” (Macaluso 208). In layman’s terms, Macaluso is championing her Rancièrian pedagogy a new form of literary interpretation where an understanding of equality is established for all individuals capable of human thought, and where each person has the ability to create their own intellectual emancipation through independent study, thought, and reflection, with or without a guided lesson from an academic teacher.

In 2012, Christopher Nelson utilizes the term “interpretation” heavily in his written discussion regarding *Fool’s Crow*, a novel by James Welch, who is a member of the Blackfoot and A’aninin tribes and who is also credited with ushering in the Native American Renaissance. The story of *Fool’s Crow* is a symbolic writing from the point of the view of the protagonist, who foresees the end of his tribe’s cultural way of life under threat of destruction from colonization from white settlers. In *Fool’s Crow*, Nelson discusses the idea of the usage of interpretation in Welch’s work, writing, “These lines, then, suggest text in its broadest sense as that which requires interpretation, both visions and the words of stories, through which the fragmented pieces of the other images can forge a transhistorical connection between people

(Nelson 63).” In this usage of “interpretation,” Nelson discusses how in Native American literature anything in the form of communication is open to interpretation, such as personal visions and oral story-telling which allows the reader to build mental pictures in their heads from what they have read that can forge a bond between people from historical times to people of today’s modern world.

In 2016, Dr. Sarah Hernandez, researched the topic of the American Indian literary nationalism movement, whose methodology defines nationalism as “a legitimate perspective from which to approach Native American literature and criticism and that such a methodology is not only defensible, but crucial to supporting Native national sovereignty and self-determination (Hernandez 64-65).” Dr. Hernandez, member of the Sicangu Dakota tribe, discusses the importance of the topic of indigenous literary movement in her writing on Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, an eminent scholar, author and member of the Crow Creek Sioux, whose “literary scholarship helped lay the groundwork for American Indian literary nationalism (Hernandez 65).” Elizabeth Cook-Lynn ultimately decided not to pursue her Ph.D due to pressures to reinforce Native stereotypes over changing the existing conversations regarding Native portrayals in literature. In 1999, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, wrote Aurelia: A Crow Creek Trilogy, in which the main character Aurelia Blue is a teenage member of the Crow Creek Sioux who is living in a world between traditional Dakota teachings and modern ways. According to Cook-Lynn’s personal interpretation, Aurelia Blue, “the teenage mistress of a much older, married man has actually adapted and modified the traditional Dakota role of second wife... to play a modern female role in a culture that at one time not so long ago was polyamorous (Hernandez 70).” In Cook-Lynn’s interpretation, she interprets Aurelia Blue as blending the old traditional Dakota ways with the current contemporary American lifestyle, showing the ability to utilize the native narrative form

of oral storytelling as a foundation from which to branch out into the written word in mainstream society. Dr. Hernandez also details that Cook-Lynn disapproves of the nationalism “school of literary criticism and has firmly denounced “its disastrous effects... over the study of Native languages and tribally-specific literary theory and aesthetics... [hinting] that there is a more effective literary methodology for analyzing, interpreting, and critically engaging in Native literature (Hernandez 65).” The methodology to which Cook-Lynn refers is the idea of a nation-centered literary approach to Native literature because it “will help situate the content and structure of the text in a tribally specific context (Hernandez 71).”

In order to understand the far-reaching implications of interpretation in the international scale, a parallel example will be made to Steven Mailloux’s example of the interpretation of the ABM Treaty (Mailloux 128), in the interpretation of creation stories when passing laws through the Navajo Nation legislative body. In 2008, Dr. Jennifer Denetdale, an esteemed expert on the subject of Native American studies, highlights the real-world consequences of improper interpretation of traditional Navajo cultural gender and identity in her discussion of the Marriage Act of 2005, a law that was passed by the Navajo Nation legislative body that allows only heterosexual marriages to be acknowledged under tribal law. In traditional Navajo culture prior to 1864, the people at one time acknowledged and respected a third and, possibly even a fourth gender role in the tribal community: “Navajo understandings of multiple genders are based on traditional stories about the *nádleehí*, often termed hermaphrodites. In creation narratives, the *nádleehí* played a crucial role in bringing about harmony between men and women after a period of conflict and unrest between the two sexes (Denetdale 293).” Despite these traditional teachings regarding the third and four gender roles found in Navajo history, Larry Anderson, the delegate who sponsored the bill emphasized that his legislation was important to maintain

traditional American family values, promoting the ideas of the traditional American nuclear family and monogamy. Though the legislation passed through the council, President Joe Shirley Jr. vetoed the bill, “citing its low priority for Navajo citizens, its discriminatory nature, and its violation of a basic human right. Not deterred by the president's veto, Anderson mounted a successful campaign to override the veto, wherein the council voted sixty-two to fourteen in favor of the Diné Marriage Act (Denetdale 293).” This political scenario showcases the conflict between traditional tribal values and contemporary American values, which can result in a politically charged race to set tribal legislation regarding issues that will have long-lasting implications for its citizens.

In conclusion, the literary term “interpretation” has greatly evolved since 1995 with the formation of newer identified literary forms of interpretation, such as the transactional literary theory formed by Louise Rosenblatt, understanding the schools of thought behind New Criticism and reader-response theory as detailed by Chauncy Monte-Santo, and how they result in the creation of a new literary form of interpretation called Rancièrian pedagogy as discussed by Kati Macaluso. Furthermore, the term “interpretation” has far-reaching implications in regard to Native American literature, resulting in new literary movements such as American Indian nationalism and nation-centered literary approach to Native literature as detailed in the writing of Dr. Sarah Hernandez, and the mis-interpretation of oral creation narratives continue to have far-reaching implications for the political agendas being pushed through Native legislatures, as seen in the Diné Marriage Act of 2005. Due to the fact that the Native American literature genre is such a new field in comparison to the global platform of Western literature, there is a certain amount of compromise and forgiveness that is to be allowed while this unique form of literature continues to take shape through the writings of indigenous Native authors in the literary world.

Suggested Readings

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