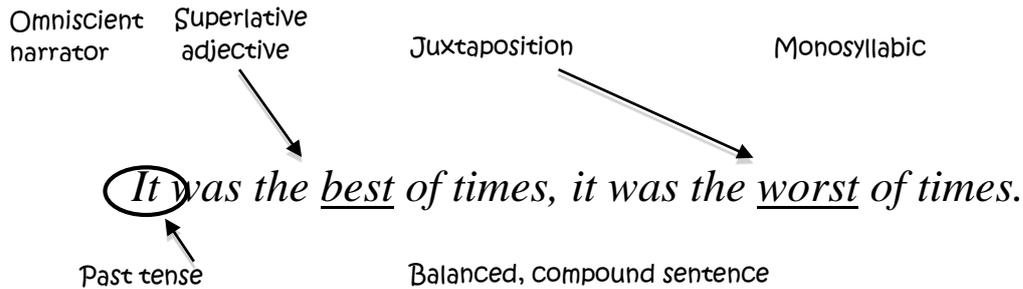


A Way into Analysis

Step #1 - Annotate



Annotating essentially boils down to taking a pen and a piece of text and going crazy. The very first time you read through text have a pen ready in your hand and note down *everything* that strikes you. Circle, underline, highlight – as you read you’re deconstructing the text and spotting techniques. For example, let’s annotate the famous opening line of Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*:



Annotate

 Now it’s over to you. Have a go at annotating the following line. Comment on as much as possible: word class, structure, perspective, tense, syntax and imagery. If you need to work on expanding your technical vocabulary refer to the glossary. Why bother with this? The activity of making notes prompts you to deconstruct and process as you go. Not only is this handy in itself, but when it comes to writing your essay you will have plenty of notes to refer to.



“Science is organised knowledge. Wisdom is organised life.”
- Immanuel Kant

Step #2 – Line-by-line



Start annotating and you’ll begin discovering how much careful examination of each line of text can yield. The next step involves moving beyond *technique spotting* to analyse the *purpose* and *effect* of each technique. With each sentence, with each line, word or even syllable, ask yourself: what’s notable about this? Why has the author chosen to use that word/sound/structure? Don’t just answer, “err... because it fits the rhythm?” or, just as bad, “to emphasise... something?” These comments are vague and irrelevant. Trust me when I say that texts are always packed with enough linguistic and stylistic technical treats to fill a four page essay – you *don’t* need to resort to making up dull, nonsensical speculations. We’ve all been there, staring at our English teacher in dumb bewilderment as they get all hot under the collar for the way a comma has been used in some poem by an old dead white guy. “No!” you think. “It doesn’t *mean* anything. It doesn’t represent the paralysis of the protagonist... it’s just grammar!” Although you’re torn between pity and admiration that an ageing teacher can glean so much joy from a squiggle of ink, you’re certain the poet never intended half the meanings they’ve come up with. Well, you’d be surprised. Poems are tightly crafted pieces of text. Authors pick words, frame sentences, choose images and arrange syntax, all for deliberate effect.

I’ll demonstrate how to move beyond *technique spotting* through line-by-line analysis of ‘In My Craft or Sullen Art’ by Dylan Thomas; in my opinion one of the most linguistically dexterous poets of all time. If any of the terms I’m using are unfamiliar check out the glossary. Now, time to revel in the technical minutiae of poetry.

Literary Theory

The existence of literary theory was one of the greatest revelations in the first year of my English degree. Literary theories seek to answer the question: “How do we find meaning in a text?” and set the perspective from which we approach a text. Whether you’ve been aware of it or not, the way you’ve been taught to study texts throughout school is based on a particular literary theory. High school English teachers encourage their students to find meaning in a text by identifying themes and analysing characters. This literary theory is known as **liberal humanism**.

An Introduction

To give you a whirlwind overview of the major literary theories I’ll use a story we’re all familiar with – *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. A reminder of the plot: an evil queen becomes so threatened by her stepdaughter Snow White’s beauty surpassing her own that she sends a huntsman to kill her. The huntsman chickens out and Snow White comes across a cottage inhabited by seven dwarfs. The queen discovers Snow White is still alive, disguises herself as a hag and tricks the princess into eating a poisoned apple that puts her into a deathlike sleep. The queen dies a suitable death falling off a cliff. Luckily a prince who has earlier been enraptured by Snow White’s beauty happens to be passing through the area and makes the questionable decision to kiss her corpse, displayed by the dwarfs in a glass coffin. True love’s kiss conquers all. The curse is broken and “they all lived happily ever after”.



Lit theory	Focuses on...	Meaning in <i>Snow White</i> can be found in...
Feminism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the position of women the depiction of women the balance of power between men and women. stereotypes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> extreme stereotyping of women (evil or saint-like) Snow White’s lack of a father leaves her vulnerable until rescued by another male patriarchal figure stereotyping ideals of femininity – beautiful, humble, in touch with nature Snow White’s value is in her cooking and cleaning and her beauty evil stepmother as antagonist – powerful, violent, insecure and vain only a male, the prince, has the power to save her.
New Historicism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> context in which the text is set – time, place the author’s own context – when, where, how and why were they writing? What key social, political and cultural events/movements were occurring at this time? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> embedded assumptions about patriarchal figures the roles of masters/servants the family structure and perspectives on children and stepchildren the extent to which it reflected contemporary attitudes towards women in 1937 consider Disney’s adaptation of the story from the original version by the Brothers Grimm.
Psychoanalysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> dreams parent/child relationships psychosexual development repression depression. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> stepmother, Snow White, prince as id, ego and superego respectively fantasy, magic and wish fulfillment queen’s insecurity manifested in defence mechanisms issues surrounding the loss of her father and the need for a dominant male figure (Electra Complex).

Don’t panic if you feel overwhelmed by all of these theories – you just need to know that there are a myriad of theories (and consequently meanings) for any given text. But which one should we trust...?

The search for meaning

Literary theory is all about where meaning lies in a text and how to find it. All literary theories essentially argue that meaning is found in one of the following places:

1. With the *author* (Intentionalism, Liberal Humanism).
2. In the *context* (New Historicism, Marxism,
3. In the *text* itself (New Criticism).
4. With the *reader* (Reader Response Theory).