



Literary Theories

A Case Study in Critical Performance

Edited by

Julian Wolfreys
and William Baker

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PERFORMANCE

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WILLIAM BAKER





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Preface and Acknowledgements

Arguably, today most teachers of literature, most academics and researchers in literary studies, are in some way 'theorized' in their approaches, to a greater or lesser extent, whatever the school of thought to which they claim affinity, to which they are seen as adhering. Their – and our – pedagogical approaches and their interpretive techniques are informed by disciplines and fields of thought not having originated in Departments of English and literary studies. Furthermore, it is now quite commonplace to find in Departments of English Literature in universities throughout the English-speaking world courses for undergraduates which, in some manner or other, address the subject of 'literary theory'. This broad heading, which we shall go on to reject as an unhelpful umbrella term in our introduction, serves to gather together discourses from numerous disciplines outside the immediate field and traditional concerns of literary study as is well known, discourses which range from the obviously political – feminism, Marxism – to the quasi-scientific (psychoanalysis, semiotics, structuralism). What often emerges on the positive side from such interaction is a series of sophisticated, fertile, hybrid interpretive techniques importing useful analytical methods into the service of critical reading and interpretation. On the negative side – unfortunately the side on which the student seems to be positioned frequently, albeit inadvertently – and because of the sheer proliferation of published theoretical analysis over the last 25 years, students are left bewildered through not comprehending the contexts of the thought which they are required to apply to poems, novels or plays. Another potentially negative effect of

the importation of theoretical models from outside the field of English Studies is that theories (can) get watered down, ideologies hidden, positions reified, seemingly not positions at all but merely the 'natural' assumptions of that particular discourse.

At the same time as the development of diverse theoretical approaches to literary analysis there have, inevitably, appeared a range of explicatory texts, histories, overviews and anthologies, aimed at various areas of the student market, from the undergraduate to graduate student, with the idea of providing introductions to what is commonly called 'literary theory'. Amongst these we might include Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: an Introduction*, Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice*, Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*, Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh's *Literary Theory: A Reader*, Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism*, Josué Harari's *Textual Strategies*; we might even include the entire Methuen 'New Accents' series. All have their good and bad points, all are conceived with different student groups in mind, from first-year undergraduates, to doctoral students. No one text, however, can claim to be 'definitive' or authoritative', the field of 'literary theory' being just too diverse, too broad. (This should not, of course, suggest that any of the texts mentioned in the paragraph claim authority. We are merely pointing out a significant problem of introducing the student to 'literary theory'.)

More recently, there have also appeared 'casebooks', combining editions of familiar texts (Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, James Joyce's *The Dead*) with a range of critical essays from different theoretical perspectives treating the text in question. Clearly such books have developed partly out of the experience of teaching 'theory', teaching from theoretical positions, and applying that theory – those theories – to textual exegesis; such casebooks have also appeared, it can be suggested, partly out of a sense of a desire to provide the student with an immediate example of the multi-layered condition of textual meaning when viewed through the lens of 'theory' in a single volume, oriented around a single work. This current volume is one such casebook, although not entirely similar to those already mentioned.

How, then, might we suggest that this volume is different? How might we justify yet one more collection of literary-theoretical essays? What might be our arguments be for such a volume, aimed at undergraduates encountering theoretically oriented

interpretive approaches, if not for the first time then with a sense of unfamiliarity?

Our purpose in this collection is to allow the student to witness various literary theories performing acts of reading and theoretically grounded interpretation around a single short story, a recently discovered, never before published manuscript by Richard Jefferies. Furthermore, we do not suggest to the student that this is a pluralist collection. We want the student to witness the development of certain tensions between the essays. We argue, in the introduction, that there is no *one* literary theory, not some absolutely totalizable, comprehensible approach to literature which is termed 'theoretical'. If it is commonplace to find courses entitled 'literary theory' taught throughout English departments today, as we suggested above, it is equally easy for undergraduates to find such a hydra daunting, off-putting, *monstrous*, in its being presented as a discernible multi-headed body, distinct from literature. The student may well end up disagreeing with a particular theoretical model; but surely, isn't the rejection better coming from a position of knowledge, rather than one of ignorance? and, equally, isn't it better to let the students in, if only in order that they can find their own way out? As possible answers to such questions this collection seeks to provide as accessible and approachable an introduction as possible, without diluting or obscuring either the theoretical or ideological issues.

With these concerns in mind we have adopted the casebook approach, but have chosen to offer to the student a fairly short text. A number of the casebooks available for undergraduates feature novels. The novels and stories chosen for such critical attention are usually defined as being *overdetermined*: In the case of narratives such as those of *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, or *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the teacher of literary theories can use the familiarity of such stories – many students will know something of the story of these novels, even though they may not have read them – to play off students' expectations and doxical beliefs against different theoretical readings. The student's excitement can be engaged precisely because the various theoretical modes confound her or his expectations and presuppositions through the new insights which such modes allow. This in turn can lead to a direct questioning and discussion of literary value, what constitutes literature, and how the literary canon is formed,

all of which is both valuable to the student and an intrinsic element in the more politicized forms of literary-theoretical thinking.

The disadvantage of such primary texts – a minor disadvantage, yet still an important one – is one of *length*. The student can be overwhelmed when having to read, sometimes simultaneously, a long and quite convoluted narrative *and* a number of quite abstract texts. Furthermore, the student, in keeping up with the theoretical material, would not necessarily have the opportunity of reading the primary text more than once or, at the most, twice.

On the other hand, the student can read a short story in a relatively short space of time; unlike a novel, a short story allows the reader the possibility of re-reading each time s/he encounters a new theoretical approach. A short story also shows, because of its brevity, how different readings can be developed with full attention to many of the same details. With a multi-layered novel, critics working from different critical positions may not touch on the same material. A short story, however, affords the opportunity for close discussion of the same points. This, we believe, allows the student reader the opportunity of seeing more precisely how literary theories serve to enrich the reading process. A short story such as 'Snowed Up' is particularly exciting, then, because it provides the critic and the student alike the chance to encounter a new, hitherto unpublished text, and one moreover which is highly overdetermined, richly, often densely communicative and yet both brief and clear. When one adds to this the fact that Richard Jefferies himself is relatively unknown, both teacher and student are presented with some potentially fascinating interpretive possibilities. If a story *is* well known, if there are sufficient numbers of critical evaluations around which dazzle with their virtuosity and impress with their authority, then what access does the student have to such a work or criticism of it? A relatively unknown author and a completely unknown story change the stakes of interpretation. For the critics here this story has provided an opportunity of examining their own pedagogical procedures while putting to work their theoretical knowledge. Without exception, each writer found it exciting to work with what was, to them, an initially unknown text. We can only hope the excitement and enthusiasm is conveyed to the student reader through each of these essays.



We would like to thank Margaret Bartley at Macmillan for having faith in this project and for being so encouraging throughout its various stages. We would also like to thank those students in literary theory courses who responded in various ways to both Richard Jefferies' short story and to drafts of many of the essays contained in this collection, all of which came to be revised as a result of their questions, queries and insights. Finally we would like to thank King's School, Canterbury, and the librarians responsible for the Walpole Collection in King's School Library, for kind permission to publish 'Snowed Up' for the first time.

Julian Wolfreys and William Baker
Perth and DeKalb

Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements	vii
Overture	1
Introduction: JULIAN WOLFREYS AND WILLIAM BAKER	3
'Snowed Up: A Mistletoe Story' RICHARD JEFFERIES	19
A Biography of Jefferies and a Note on the Manuscript DAVID BLOMFIELD AND WILLIAM BAKER	30
Part 1 Formalist Concerns	39
1. 'Snowed Up': A Structuralist Reading JULIAN COWLEY	41
2. Snow Me Again: A Poststructuralist Narratology of 'Snowed Up' MARK CURRIE	57
3. Does Edie Count?: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on 'Snowed Up' JILL BARKER	75
Entr'acte	101
4. 'Snowed Up: A Mistletoe Story': Feminist Approaches RUTH ROBBINS	103

Part 2 Political and Ideological Accounts	127
5. Agriculture and Anarchy: A Marxist Reading of 'Snowed Up' JESSICA MAYNARD	129
6. Power and its Representations: A New Historicist Reading of Richard Jefferies' 'Snowed Up' JOHN BRANNIGAN	157
Encore	177
7. An 'Economics' of Snow and the Blank Page, or, 'Writing' at the 'Margins': 'Deconstructing' 'Richard Jefferies'? JULIAN WOLFREYS	179
Bibliography	245
Notes on Contributors	251
Index	253

Overture

Introduction

JULIAN WOLFREYS AND WILLIAM BAKER

(NOT JUST) ANOTHER TEXTBOOK ABOUT LITERARY THEORY?

Literary Theories: a Case Study in Critical Performance. Perhaps a couple of things strike you about the title of this collection. Why, for instance, is there the insistence on ‘theories’ rather than ‘theory’? And why the phrase ‘critical performance’ instead of the more conventional, more commonplace ‘critical practice’ (which, had it been there, would have signalled some kind of pairing or opposite to the equally absent ‘theory’)? You see precisely what is absent, yet still partially readable, from the title is another title, which might be something like *Literary Theory: a Case Study in Critical Practice*. Such a title today expresses the conventional, the expected, the predictable; almost, we would say, after so many years of ‘theory’, the generic, which title might usefully express the following: first (the absent title would imply), there is *theory*, a model or programme separate from the act, the *practice*, of reading literature. Once you have learned the particular set of rules of the theory, once you have come to terms with its key concepts, ways of thinking, then you can go away and use those tools on a literary text of your choice. The implication is that you can, in short, practice theory as the secondary gesture or supplement to the ‘primary’ activity of understanding and learning ‘theory’.

Well, so much for what’s not in the title. And equally, we can say, what is not in this book either. Before we go any further,

we want you to be aware that this, therefore, will not have been *just* a manual of 'literary theory'. It is that, of course, inasmuch as this is still a pedagogical aid to the introduction of theories in performance; but the essays in this collection are not interested only in teaching you how to produce the perfect feminist or psychoanalytic reading; they are also interested in something potentially more fascinating: which is, showing how a text can be read so as to spark off many different insights and connections in the reader's mind in an interactive and generative, often unpredictable, fashion. The teaching – and learning – processes hopefully will emerge from the acts of reading and writing. We believe 'showing' rather than 'telling' a more effective teaching method, and we hope you will find it so too.

However, this does not explain the 'why' of the title's idiosyncrasies, the double 'why' of 'why theories?' and 'why *performance*?' The term 'theory' implies in its all-encompassing singularity a certain homogeneity. Despite the apparent disparity between approaches to literary texts on the part of scholars of different theoretical persuasions, the disparity between, let us say, a feminist and a structuralist reading (such as you will find in the first two sections of this book), all such readings are still predicated on a 'theoretical' approach to literature, as distinct, one supposes, from an 'untheoretical' approach. Instead of just getting on with reading, merely picking up a novel, play, poem, short story, and reading any of these, the theoretical reading comes to the text with a range of theoretical – theoretical because developed apparently separately from and outside of the reading and interpretation of literature – suppositions and premises in order to test these out on the seemingly innocent text. Hence the phrase 'literary theory', which acts as a form of objectified pigeon-holing, however neutral the application of that term may be.

However, we feel that, at best, the phrase 'literary theory' is no longer serviceable because it is too homogeneous. At worst it becomes an Aunt Sally, something too easily identifiable for negative critique; hence, also, our rejection of the phrase. As these essays demonstrate in their rejection of the pigeon-hole, there is probably no act of academic reading today which is not already theorized in some manner, that is to say, not already informed by some discipline, body of thought, field, discourse, which is conventionally assumed to be extraneous to literary study, and extraneous to literature itself (what do psychoanalysis,

feminism, Marxism, linguistics, have to do with literature? It's not our intention to answer that this question here, but you might want to think about another question: what *is* literature?¹).

The editors and essayists in this collection reject the simple notion of all 'theory' being similar, and part of a general 'onslaught' on literature and literary value, historically determinable as part of the growth of literary studies during the last quarter-century. As we hope to demonstrate, the term 'literary theory' cannot adequately explain or determine how one reads or the means by which one interprets the literary text. At the same time, we also hope that, as a student perhaps coming to theoretical approaches with little previous experience of such methodologies, you will encounter the positive aspect of diversity in reading, in interpreting, without feeling that you are being asked to commit to some theoretical party line, or otherwise being coerced into following one; you should notice that, while there is diversity, there are also amongst the essays certain shared assumptions, as well as differences of opinion, even disagreements, concerning both methods of interpretation and the reading offered by those methods of interpretation. Often we may well be in contradiction with one another.

As a comparison, look at the readings by Mark Currie (Part I: 'Formalist Concerns') and Jessica Maynard (Part II: 'Political and Ideological Accounts') of Richard Jefferies' short story 'Snowed Up' (included in this volume, following this introduction): the former reads the story as valorizing culture over nature, in a gesture of structural inversion, while the latter reads the story as imposing the natural, yet symbolic phenomenon of the snow-storm onto culture as a conservative gesture and critique on the part of the author. Where such contradiction exists there can be *no one literary theory*, in the double sense that one model has any greater truth claim than another, and that several approaches can be gathered together, under titles such as *Practising Theory* or *Beginning Theory*. There are, however, *literary theories*, models of thought, structures of discourse, which can overlap or contrast with one another; processes which can even incorporate, or be contaminated by, ways of thinking common to theoretical discourses not their own. Let's look at one brief example.

BINARY OPPOSITIONS

So far, in this introduction we have been discussing the reasons for the title of this book. In order to explain this in relation to the essays and some of the reasons why they were written, we have been looking critically at the function of the terms *theory* and *practice*. *Theory/practice* constitutes an example of what a number of the critics term a binary opposition. You'll notice in this collection, for example, the common and quite frequent reference in many of the essays to the binary oppositions, pairings of concepts, images, ideas, figures of speech, which play an important part in the short story 'Snowed Up'. Such pairings have a history of theorization, extending back to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, but it is Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist (see Julian Cowley's essay in 'Formalist Concerns'), whose work in the early years of this century with such binarisms in speech (night/day, black/white, good/bad) and their relative semantic values, prior to his death in the First World War, which has subsequently come to inform the more self-aware theoretical approaches to literary criticism (that is to say, those literary-critical methodologies which are happy to admit that they are theoretical in the first place, and not disavow the theoretical impulses in their acts of reading; as you probably know quite well, what was called New Criticism never proposed an overtly theoretical model for its interpretive acts). Here we see how structural linguistics, the name given to Saussure's linguistic model, comes from a discourse outside literary criticism.

With regard to binary oppositions, and other binary pairings, when you read this collection, you will observe that the readers gathered here have not brought to their acts of reading such binarisms or pairings, but have observed these at work *in* the primary text. What all of the readers have done, in their various ways, and with their various theories in mind, is to observe how the numerous figurative and conceptual pairings and oppositions in 'Snowed Up' function within both plot and narrative. They observe also how Richard Jefferies draws the use of such binarisms from general cultural assumptions outside the field of literature, so that the semantic effect of the pairings is to replicate a cultural condition or assumption, creating a sense for the reader of verisimilitude, whereby the literary text appears to approximate the 'real world'. From common observation on the

part of those critics here who do have recourse to binary oppositions, what emerges across the essays is a sense of the complex, multi-layered patterning which structures and overdetermines the story from various perspectives; you will, we hope and believe, see how, in different ways, the binaries operate or perform in the act of reading in order to make the narrative move along, and make sense; in short, how the narrative structure is articulated by such paired figures.

OVERFLOWING 'THEORY', OVERFLOWING THEORIES: CONNECTIONS AND DISJUNCTIONS

In the structuralist, narratological, psychoanalytic, feminist, and Marxist accounts of 'Snowed Up' there occur references to binary oppositions and structures. Thus from this one detail of the readings, it can be seen that no one 'theory' is isolated or self-sufficient. Critical, theorized writing and reading already overflows, exceeds the homogeneity of the term theory. Each theory is, already, *theories*, plural within itself, as to the discourses which compose it. Ruth Robbins's feminism (the essay in the 'Entr'acte' of this collection) and Jessica Maynard's Marxism (in Section II) are not discrete disciplines, sealed off from other forms of thought, as their use of binarisms shows. Similarly, Jill Barker's psychoanalytic reading ('Formalist Concerns') nods in the direction of feminist ideology. Furthermore, to refer to Robbins's and Maynard's chapters once again, both writers show how there is neither only one feminism, nor only a single Marxism, the former moving between considerations of images of women to poststructuralist considerations, while the latter begins by defining the concept of the dialectic – a binary structure of sorts – moving on to incorporate more recent developments in Marxist cultural thinking. Both Maynard and Robbins acknowledge in their interpretations a history of competing and conflicting discourses – and *theories* – within their respective fields, Marxism and feminism; fields or theories which are, and have been, in *practice*, in *performance*, for as long as there have been attempts to articulate the theory of such political thought.

Similarly, Julian Cowley's and Mark Currie's essays, both in the first section, 'Formalist Concerns', implicitly acknowledge