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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching William Shakespeare's

Richard III

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Elizabeth Osborne



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General Introduction to the Work

List of Characters

Richard – Duke of Gloucester, later King Richard III

George – Duke of Clarence, Richard's brother

King Edward IV – brother to Richard and George

Elizabeth – Edward's queen

Lady Anne Neville – wife to the deceased Prince Edward, later married to Richard III

Margaret – the former queen of England, wife to the deceased Henry VI and mother to the dead Prince Edward

Richard's Supporters

Duke of Buckingham

Lord Hastings

Lord Stanley

Catesby

Ratcliffe

Elizabeth's Children

Edward – Prince of Wales

Richard – Duke of York

Elizabeth's Relatives and Supporters

Rivers

Vaughan

Grey

Formalism Applied to *Richard III*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Examining the Soliloquies for Language Patterns

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *Richard III*: Formalist Activity One: Examining Soliloquies and Richard III Formalist Activity One: Rhetorical Devices Checklist.
2. Divide the students into five groups, or a number of groups divisible by five.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following soliloquies (on handouts):
 - Act I, Scene I, lines 1-41
 - Act I, Scene I, lines 144-162
 - Act I, Scene II, lines 226-263
 - Act I, Scene III, lines 324-338
 - Act V, Scene III, lines 178-207
4. Have each group fill in the chart with all the examples it can find for each device. Some soliloquies may have no examples of a particular device—it's important to record this as "0."
5. Reconvene the class. Have each group read out its similes and metaphors. If there are any similes or metaphors that extend between soliloquies, make sure each group catches and records them.
6. Tally up the number of uses of each figure of speech and come up with an average number of uses for each one.
7. Based on these numbers, answer the following questions:
 - Overall, is the language simple or complex?
 - Overall, is the language figurative or literal?
 - Overall, is the language sincere or ironic?

New Historicism Applied to *Richard III*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.



Activity One

Analyzing the Play for Objectivity in Historical Reporting

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Richard III*: New Historicism Activity One: Whose View of History?
2. Review with students the following facts from the General Introduction to the Work and the play itself.
 - The Wars of the Roses was a series of civil wars between two branches of the royal family over which branch had the most rightful claim to the throne: the House of York and the House of Lancaster.
 - Edward IV and Richard III were of the House of York.
 - The Earl of Richmond was of the House of Lancaster.
 - The “Queen Elizabeth” in the play is the wife/widow of Edward IV.
 - Her daughter Elizabeth is the Elizabeth whom the Earl of Richmond marries at the end of the play.
 - The forces supporting the Earl of Richmond (Lancaster) in the play defeat the forces supporting Richard III (York).
 - The “Earl of Richmond” in the play becomes King Henry VII. His marriage to Elizabeth unites the two warring houses and ends the Wars of the Roses.
 - Henry VII’s son was King Henry VIII.
 - Henry VIII’s daughter was the Queen Elizabeth under whom Shakespeare lived and wrote.
3. Review with students the following tenets of New Historicism:
 - The losers of history do not have the means to write their stories, nor is there usually an audience interested in hearing them.
 - The powerless have “historical stories” to relate that are not to be found in official documents, mostly because they played no hand in creating them.

Psychoanalytical Approach Applied to *Richard III*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Analyzing Dreams in *Richard III*

1. As a class, review the explanation of dynamic characters presented in the Notes on Psychoanalytic Theory Essential Question #8). In addition, review the discussion of dreams as important clues to subconscious or repressed desires.
2. Have students reread the following passages (depending on the class, you may want to have them read the scene/passage aloud):
 - Clarence's dream (Act I, Scene IV)
 - Richard and Richmond's shared dream (Act V Scene III)
3. As a class, discuss the following questions about *each* dream:
 - How is the dream related to the audience?
 - What images are prevalent in the dream.
 - What people are in the dream?
 - How does the character respond to the dream?
 - What impact does the dream have on the dreamer's actions in the play? (If there is no impact, what does this suggest about the character?)
 - What impact does the dream have on the subsequent plot of the play? (If there is no impact, what does this suggest about the dream and/or the dreamer?)
 - Ultimately, what was Shakespeare's probable intent in presenting this dream? To what extent was he successful in achieving this intent?

Note: Students do not need to agree or come to consensus in their discussions of these questions.