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WORKING ON LITERARY ANALYSIS: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

When you read for pleasure, your only goal is enjoyment. You might find yourself reading to get caught up in an exciting story, to learn about an interesting time or place, or just to pass time. Maybe you're looking for inspiration, guidance, or a reflection of your own life. There are as many different, valid ways of reading a book as there are books in the world. When you read a work of literature in an English class, however, you're being asked to read in a special way: You're being asked to perform literary analysis.

The aim of the article is to give a theoretical survey of the process of literary analysis as well as to convey it practically on the basis of Ken Kesey's novel «One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest», which might be useful for foreign languages department students, who take British and American Literature courses.

At first, the definition of the term «Analysis» should be given: «A method by which a thing is separated into parts, and those parts are given rigorous, logical, detailed scrutiny, resulting in a consistent and relatively complete account of the elements of the thing and the principles of their organization» [1]. «Detailed examination of the elements or structure of something» [2].

To analyze something means to break it down into smaller parts and then examine how those parts work, both individually and together. Literary analysis involves examining all the parts of a novel, play, short story, or poem—elements such as character, setting, tone, and imagery—and thinking about how the author uses those elements to create certain effects. Literary analysis has distinctions from a book review— it isn't necessary to express your opinion on the book, or recommend it to another reader. Literary analysis asks, «How does this piece of literature actually work?» «How does it do what it does?» and, «Why might the author have made the choices he or she did?»

Literary analysis is a creative process and there is no strict way to follow, however, we offer an approximate scheme of it to facilitate the procedure:

Work on the Setting: Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place.

- The aspects that make up the setting (geography, weather, time of day, social conditions);
- The role that the setting plays in the story (being an important part of the plot or theme or being just a backdrop against which the action takes place);
- Studying the time period, which is also part of the setting (all the criteria that affect the plot, the language, atmosphere – time of action, period of creation);

Characterization: Characterization in a literary analysis deals with the way the characters are described.

– through dialogue, by the way they speak, physical appearance? Their thoughts and feelings?

– interaction – the way they act towards other characters?

– are they static characters who do not change? Do they develop by the end of the story?

– what type of characters are they? what qualities stand out?

– are they stereotypes? are the characters believable?

Plot and structure: The plot is the main sequence of events that make up the story.

– Name the most important events;

– Is the structure of the plot linear, chronological or does it move back and forth?

– Define the turning points, a climax and/or an anticlimax?

– Note if the plot is believable;

Narrator and Point of view: The narrator is the person telling the story. Point of view: whose eyes the story is being told through.

– Define is the narrator or speaker in the story; if the narrator is the main character; does the author speak through one of the characters?

– Is the story written in the first person «I» point of view? Is the story written in a detached third person «he/she» point of view? Is the story written in an «all-knowing» 3rd person who can reveal what all the characters are thinking and doing at all times and in all places?

Conflict: Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the novel and is related to the main character. The conflict may be of two kinds in a story– internal (the character suffers inwardly) or external (caused by the surroundings or environment that the main character finds himself/herself in)

Theme: The theme is the main idea, lesson or message in the novel. It is usually an abstract, universal idea about the human condition, society or life, to name a few.

– How does the theme shine through in the story?

– Are any elements repeated that may suggest a theme?

– What other themes are there?

Style: The author’s style has to do with the author’s vocabulary, use of imagery, tone or feeling of the story. It has to do with his attitude towards the subject. In some novels the tone can be ironic, humorous, cold or dramatic.

– Is the text full of figurative language?

– Does the author use a lot of symbolism? Metaphors, similes? An example of a metaphor is when someone says, «My love, you are a rose». An example of a simile is «My darling, you are like a rose.»

– What images are used?

Your literary analysis of a novel will often be in the form of an essay or book report where you will be asked to give your opinions of the novel at the end. To conclude, choose the elements that made the greatest impression on you. Point out which characters you liked best or least and always support your arguments. Try to view the novel as a whole and try to give a balanced analysis.

As an example of a literary analysis we offer the one made on the basis of the novel «One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest» written by Ken Kesey in 1962.

The setting: The lunatic asylum is set somewhere in Oregon and the time period is the late 1950s or early 1960s. We know this in part because World War II is still a recent memory for Chief, but he’s been at the hospital for a while. The hospital is a small world of regulations, routine, and discipline ruled over by Nurse Ratched. The atmosphere in the hospital is extremely tense and jerky. Unlike in the outside world, Nurse Ratched has just about absolute control over her ward. In and of herself, she’s not that strong (which is what McMurphy tries to point out by exposing her bare chest), only in her setting does she have power. In the ward, she can bully, blackmail, and generally make life unpleasant for any staff members she doesn’t approve of until they quit. In such a way, she has gained a strong position of power, which is only strengthened by her ability to determine the fates of her patients – what kinds of medications and treatments they receive, including lobotomies.

Characterization: The main characters in the novel are McMurphy, Nurse Ratched and Chief. They are described through dialogues (McMurphy, Nurse Ratched), their manner of behavior (Chief). We observe the way the atmosphere in the hospital changes when the interaction between the protagonist and antagonist gets the highest degree. The clash of interests, the war of standards, systems is represented in faces of McMurphy (the protagonist) and Nurse Ratched (the antagonist).

Chief is the narrator of the story and for most of the book, he’s just an observer. He watches how McMurphy interacts with the men, what McMurphy is trying to do, and how the staff reacts. Because Chief pretends to be deaf and unable to speak, people talk freely around him, allowing him to learn their secrets. Although he appears powerless, he actually has a lot of power because of all the knowledge he’s gained through observation and listening in on conversations. Chief has a theory about the way the world works: it’s all a great big machine (called the Combine) and everybody is just part of this machine. The parts that are broken are sent to this hospital to be «fixed» again – to be wired back into this machine. He doesn’t want to be part

of it. He resists it and part of the resistance is pretending to be deaf and speechless. McMurphy is so charismatic, and so outside of the Combine system, that he gives Chief hope that life doesn't have to mean fitting into the machine that is the Combine. Eventually, Chief reveals that he can talk and hear just fine. He tries to protect McMurphy by explaining how the system works, and to what lengths they (the people who promote the Combine, like Nurse Ratched) will go to prevent McMurphy from gaining power. But, McMurphy is too confident. Chief tries to protect McMurphy again when he gets into a fight with the black orderlies. And he tries to protect McMurphy again when they go to the Disturbed ward and are subjected to electroshock therapy. But ultimately, he fails to protect the man he has come to see as a savior. When McMurphy finally returns to the ward as a lobotomized vegetable, Chief frees him from the physical prison of his body by smothering him with a pillow. Because of McMurphy, Chief finally has the courage to break free from the hospital escapes through a window after breaking it the way McMurphy trained him to. Chief plays the role of eyes and ears in the novel, as well as the one who guides us into and out of this strange, mysterious, crazy world.

Physical Appearance: In many instances in this novel, you can tell what a character's personality is like based on their physical appearance. For example, McMurphy has tattoos, which might lead you to believe he's a bit of a rebel. Kesey often describes Nurse Ratched as having a face that looks like it's made of plastic, so she's pretty much a fake and inhuman. Doctor Spivy is scrawny, has tiny eyes, and wears glasses, so he's a pushover.

Clothing: The way characters dress provides insights into their personalities. Nurse Ratched's perfectly white, tight uniform indicates her obsession with cleanliness and order as well as her attempt to contain her womanhood by disguising how big her breasts are. McMurphy, in contrast, is often wearing boxers with whales on them, showing that he's quite a bit more free-spirited.

Occupation: In this novel, you can usually make broad generalization about characters based on their occupation within the ward. For example, the orderlies are there to keep the patients in line and to enforce rules and regulations. By default, this makes them mean people. This places them in a position of authority over the patients, which allows them to abuse their powers.

Acutes vs. Chronics: Within the book, the patients have a system of categorizing each other. The Acutes are more mobile and active and able, if pressed, to think for themselves. They also tend to be voluntary patients, showing that most of them are there because they're afraid of the outside world. The Chronics are patients that aren't expected to ever be able to leave the ward. Most of them were committed to the ward, so they aren't voluntary patients. For the most part, the Chronics also are so ill – or so damaged from treatments like lobotomies – that they can hardly even move around or understand anything that's going on around them. The only Chronic that doesn't fit the mould is Chief.

Speech and Dialogue: Slang. McMurphy is up on current slang and he uses it constantly. For example, he calls prostitutes «twitches» and refers to the other patients as «birds» as in «You birds want to wager a bet?» McMurphy's style of speech is important because it further emphasizes that he's a man of the Outside world and that he's a free spirit. Unlike the stodgy and dated speech of many of the other patients, McMurphy doesn't sound like he's been stuck in an insane asylum for 10 years – he sounds fresh and lively.

Stiff, Grammatically Correct Speech. Some of the patients speak in a really stiff way. The worst offender would definitely be Harding. He says things to McMurphy like, «A 'pecking party'? I fear your quaint down-home speech is wasted on me, my friend. I have not the slightest inclination what you're talking about.» Wow. Harding definitely sounds like he's been locked away for a long time, especially in contrast to McMurphy.

The plot and structure. When McMurphy shows up, one of the tools he utilizes to undermine her is to change up the setting of the book. He's a breath of fresh air for the patients and essentially a taste of the Outside and freedom. Since Nurse Ratched tries so hard to keep the Outside out of her ward, McMurphy is a huge threat. One way or another, McMurphy tends to instigate changes of scenery. He manages to get a new day room for the Acutes in an old tub room, away from Nurse Ratched's music and watchful eye. He also gets the Acutes and Chief out on a fieldtrip to go fishing. He even takes Nurse Ratched's own setting – the ward – and completely transforms it into a party zone. These changes of setting help the patients of the ward escape some of Nurse Ratched's domination and fear she has instilled in them. In the end, because of McMurphy, Chief is able to instigate a change of scenery for himself, and he escapes the ward completely. The main events are chronological.

Narrator and Point of view: As it's been already mentioned, the narrator of the story is Chief, who is just an observer at the beginning. The story is told from the first person «I» point of view. As it's seen from the extract : «They laugh and then I hear them mumbling behind me, heads close together. Hum of black machinery, humming hate and death and other hospital secrets».

The conflict: One could see the main conflict from the plot part of the article. It's the conflict of two systems, McMurphy opposes to the well established, working perfectly-well machinery, run by Nurse Ratched.

Theme. Freedom and Confinement. The novel's protagonist chafes at being locked up in a mental institution, but most of the patients are there voluntarily because they find freedom and safety in being confined. The world is divided into the world inside the asylum (confined) and the world Outside (freedom). But even the world inside the mental ward is divided into freedom and confinement.

Style. Ken Kesey's style of writing is full of emotiveness– in all language levels– phono-graphical (using exclamatory marks, italics, graphons etc.); lexical level (usage of evaluative adjectives, slang etc.) and syntactical level (repetitions, inversions, emphatic «do» etc.).

The author uses a language full of symbolism, imagery and allegory. For, instance, the image of fog that constantly surrounds Chief and the patients on the ward is, Chief claims, «made» by Nurse Ratched. Because we know that Chief is schizophrenic and sees things that are not literally there, we recognize that the fog may be medicinally induced and is a fog of the mind rather than a literal fog.

As we can see the following theme is extremely potential for further investigation as it has a wide range of opportunities for study.

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Summary

M. MILOVA. WORKING ON LITERARY ANALYSIS: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

The article discloses theoretical grounds of literary analysis of a fictional prose with a practical its demonstration made on the basis of Ken Kesey's novel «One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest»?

Key words: literary analysis, protagonist, antagonist, style, author, subject, characters' description.

Анотація

М. МИЛОВА. РОБОТА НАД ЛІТЕРАТУРНИМ АНАЛІЗОМ: ВІД ТЕОРІЇ ДО ПРАКТИКИ

У статті пропонуються теоретичні основи літературного аналізу твору з прикладом аналізу роману К. Кізі «One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest»

Ключові слова: літературний аналіз, протагоніст, антагоніст, стиль, автор, тема, характеристика персонажів.

Аннотация

М. МИЛОВА. РАБОТА НАД ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫМ АНАЛИЗОМ: ОТ ТЕОРИИ К ПРАКТИКЕ

В статье рассматриваются теоретические основы литературного анализа художественного произведения с примером анализа романа К. Кизи «One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest»

Ключевые слова: литературный анализ, протагонист, антагонист, стиль, автор, тема, характеристика персонажей.