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multiple readings: text ^{and} theory

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It was with great pleasure that I accepted an invitation to run a workshop at the recent NZATE Conference. The topic of my session was an overview of the use of literary theory in the teaching of English and that same focus directs this written version of my presentation. I approach this topic not as a theory guru or expert, but as a practitioner who has found that an understanding and application of theory has made me a better teacher. In particular, I believe that judicious use of theory enables me to communicate to students the diverse ways in which written and visual texts can be read, encouraging them to think for themselves in a fresh and original manner and to see points of connection between a range of texts. Combined with the essential critical tools of close reading and textual analysis and support, a knowledge of theory helps students to think critically and to shape informed, coherent arguments.

These principles are central to the Ministry of Education's Scholarship English Performance Standard. Note 5 of this standard explains the crucial term 'respond critically', which underpins all three sections of the Scholarship curriculum:

5. Respond critically is under-pinned by the essential metacognitive skills of interpretation, analysis and evaluation in EINZC, up to and including level 8. At Scholarship these skills are applied in contexts that require mature appreciation of more demanding text and questions. For example, a student may show the ability to: initiate an alternative reading or application of theory; take a fresh approach to accepted interpretations; challenge the reader's understandings; apply or deconstruct theoretical models.¹

While the Scholarship Standard explicitly refers to literary theory, it is my belief that some knowledge of theoretical concepts and models will also be of assistance to English teachers at NCEA Levels 1-3. It is my hope that this paper may aid teachers in 'initiat[ing] an alternative reading' and in applying and/or deconstructing 'theoretical models'.

Literary theory is a dense, complicated and sometimes intimidating subject. It is also in a constant state of flux and change, with new theoretical ideas and strategies constantly emerging. As I write this, one of my doctoral students is working in the relatively new field of ecocriticism, while one of my colleagues has been doing some research on trauma theory. Such theories do not emerge out of the ether, but are strongly connected to the world that we inhabit and struggle to know. Ecocriticism, with its emphasis on sustainability and the relationship between humanity and the natural world, has obvious connections to the environmental movement, while trauma theory has gained currency in the post-September 11 international environment.²

Space and practicality necessitates some selectivity in my discussion of theory. I have decided to reflect on five theoretical approaches that have been popular during the last three decades and which continue to be debated and discussed. These are: new historicism, postcolonialism, Marxism, feminism and psychoanalytic criticism. After examining each in turn, and applying each theory to a range of written and visual texts, I will end by examining one text, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, through a succession of critical lenses, demonstrating that theory is a valuable tool in amplifying understandings of literature and assisting

both teachers and students to read texts in nuanced ways.

For those wishing to explore the theoretical terrain further, there is a wealth of published material on the subject. I recommend three excellent publications, both for their clarity and for the practical examples they provide. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* is a lucid survey of a comprehensive range of theories, illustrated with examples from a wide range of literary genres.³ Charles E. Bressler's *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* combines clear and concise overviews of each theory with practical applications of the theories, including sample students essays. The *Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*, edited by Simon Malpas and Paul Wake, is valuable for its comprehensive definitions of names and terms.

Since Roland Barthes famously declared in 1967 that 'the death of the author is the birth of the reader' there has been a wide-spread critical emphasis on the multiple ways in which literary texts can be read and understood.⁴ In the late 1960s and early 1970s a group of critics, the most prominent being Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and Michael Riffaterre, developed what they termed the 'reader-response' approach to texts, arguing that 'the meaning of the text is created through the process of reading'.⁵ They were responding to the theories and practices of new criticism, with its focus on literary texts as autonomous, aesthetic objects. Indebted to the principles of 'practical criticism' advocated by the British critics I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis, the American new critics, such as Cleanth Brooks and W.K. Wimsatt, argued that 'the words on the page', rather than the life of the author, the subjective impressions of the reader, or the ideological or historical context in which texts were produced, were the proper subject for study.⁶ Iser, Fish and Riffaterre approached texts in the opposite way to Brooks and Wimsatt, believing that texts are not static entities whose essential meaning is revealed through objective study, but rather dynamic objects that readers make sense of subjectively, shaped by the individual and cultural baggage that makes us who we are: our gender,

ethnicity, class, ideology, personal history. The range of poststructuralist theoretical premises emerging from this in the 1980s, such as new historicism, feminism and postcolonialism, continued to place an emphasis on the centrality of the subjective reader and the inseparability of texts from the world in which they are produced and read.⁷

New Historicism

The critics most concerned with the contexts in which texts are produced are the new historicists. Simon Malpas provides a clear definition of this theory, writing that 'historicism criticism of literature and culture explores how the meaning of a text, idea or artefact is produced by way of its relation to the wider historical context in which it is created or experienced...meaning emerges from the languages, beliefs, practices, institutions and desires of particularly historically located culture.⁸ Influenced strongly by Michel Foucault's perception of history as a 'discontinuous process of conflict as different social discourses and institutions struggle for power', new historicists regard literary texts as being 'firmly embedded in the institutions and power relations of general culture'.⁹ As a consequence, critics such as Stephen Greenblatt do not separate texts into canonical and non-canonical categories, but seek to explore the relation between artistic and non-artistic texts.¹⁰

Many of the foremost new historicist critics are Renaissance scholars, and thus the plays of William Shakespeare provide perhaps the best examples of the application of these theories. In a first year paper which revolves around the theme of encounters between old and new worlds my students and I enjoy exploring *The Tempest* as a revenge narrative that ends in reconciliation and forgiveness, a romance, and a story of magic and the imagination. However, we also spend time considering the play's relationship with Early Modern exploration and discovery.

The setting of a literary text beside other textual evidence from the period is a central strategy of new historicist criticism. *The Tempest* was first produced in 1611, the year after William Strachey published an account of being shipwrecked in the Bermuda Islands. The storm which sunk Strachey's

ship certainly has a force that is comparable to the tempest conjured up by Prospero and Ariel: ‘...our clamours drowned in the winds, and the winds in thunder... nothing heard that could give comfort, nothing seen that might encourage hope. The Sea swelled above the clouds, and gave battle unto heaven.’¹¹ Even more pertinent, are Strachey’s comments about the Bermuda Islands, which popular belief had held was ‘given over to devils and spirits’, a claim Strachey refutes, explaining that the Islands are ‘as habitable and commodious as most countries of the same climate and situations’.¹² There is no definite record that Shakespeare read Strachey, but given the popularity and circulation of the account of the shipwreck it is certainly possible that it is one of the sources which inspired Shakespeare. An awareness of such textual contexts helps readers to appreciate that Shakespeare’s imaginative genius drew on aspects of the world he inhabited, in which exploration, sea voyages and exotic islands were a significant part.

For me, one of the biggest challenges in applying new historicist principles comes when the text under consideration has an historical setting but is, itself, of very recent creation. With such texts it is important to be alert to what the play, or novel or film reveals about contemporary preoccupations. I found this to be particularly true when teaching a graduate paper on New Zealand historical fictions. One of my chosen texts was Vincent Ward’s *River Queen*. The film is set in the 1860s and has identifiable historical reference points, with Te Kai PM partially based on the Ngati Ruanui military leader Riwha Titokowaru, Sarah’s blindfolded journey upriver to heal the warrior modelled on the journey made by Ann Evans, and Boy’s kidnapping inspired by the experience of Caroline ‘Queenie’ Perrett.¹³ However, historical fact is constantly subsumed by the demands of the myth Ward is creating, a myth of settler legitimacy achieved by becoming Maori. Ward’s thinking is clearly shaped by the current preoccupation of both creative artists and literary and cultural theorists: how do narratives written in a postcolonial environment but set in a colonial context deal with the deep need of European New Zealanders to attain a sense of belonging?

Texts such as Jane Campion’s *The Piano* and Fiona

Kidman’s *The Captive Wife* posit similar solutions. Terry Goldie, in his exploration of Canadian, Australian and New Zealand literatures, summarises this solution: ‘it is only by going native that the European arrivant can become native’.¹⁴ Stephen Turner writes that this involves a split between the coloniser, who wants to subordinate the land and eliminate the indigenous population, and the settler, who ‘in order to be at home in the place’ must become ‘somehow native, like Maori, even be Maori’.¹⁵ This is exactly the kind of displacement that takes place in *River Queen*. The imperial troops, led by the sadistic Major Baine, are depicted predominantly as cruel invaders. However, the heroine Sarah, through her acquisition of Maori language, relationship with a Maori man, and love for her part-Maori and part-European son acquires a sense of belonging and indigeneity of which her moko is the visible marker.¹⁶

Postcolonialism

Another important theoretical lens through which to consider literary texts is postcolonialism. Charles E. Bressler writes that postcolonial theorists ‘investigate what happens when two cultures clash and, more specifically, what happens when one of them, with its accessory ideology, empowers and deems itself superior to the other’.¹⁷ Postcolonialists examine representations of race, Empire and power in texts and seek to redress what they regard as both an ideological and literary power-imbalance by ‘concentrat[ing] on writings from colonized or formerly colonized cultures’.¹⁸

In ‘The Empire Writes Back’ Homi Bhabha argues that the colonised writer must create a new discourse from the place of ambivalence and ‘unhomeliness’ that they occupy.¹⁹ These theories are of particular use when engaging with the work of Maori authors such as Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace. Ihimaera reflects: ‘I like to think that I write with both love – aroha – and anger in the hope that the values of Maori life will never be lost... This is what I would like to offer: a personal vision of Maori life as I see it, the Maori side of New Zealand’s dual heritage of culture.’²⁰ In *The Matriarch* Ihimaera reconsiders New Zealand history from a Maori perspective, highlighting the injustices of the past and the ongoing effects of

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colonisation on Maori. He also emphasises that there are distinctively Maori ways of telling stories and reconstructing the past, weaving mythology, oral history, and dream sequences through the narrative.²¹ One of Ihimaera's central concerns is exploring New Zealand's literary as well as cultural history through Maori eyes. His collection of short stories *Dear Miss Mansfield* revisits the work of Katherine Mansfield from a range of perspectives. In 'The Affectionate Kidnappers' he retells Mansfield's 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' from the viewpoint of two Mori women who have been arrested for the kidnapping. They are no longer the generic 'fat and laughing' stereotypes of Mansfield's original, but two desperate and vulnerable individuals who have 'gone into darkness, gone into the stomach of the Pakeha ...eaten up by the white man'.²²

As well as focusing attention on indigenous authors, critics working in this field examine works throughout the history of literature from a postcolonial point of view. Edward Said's comments about Jane Austen's *Mansfield's Park* are amongst the most prominent and controversial of these. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said uses the brief conversation between Fanny Price and her uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, as the starting point for a discourse on the evils of slavery. While he concedes that 'everything we know about Jane Austen and her values is at odds with the cruelty of slavery', he reads the 'dead silence' with which Fanny's questions about the slave trade are met as a cultural marker of Western attempts to distance themselves from the cruel realities on which much of their wealth and privilege rested.²³

In discussing new historicism I have already alluded to readings of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. This text has also been analysed from a postcolonial viewpoint. Stephen Greenblatt interprets the play as an encounter between the coloniser (Prospero) and the colonised (Ariel and Caliban). Both Ariel and Caliban are forced to serve Prospero and both long for their freedom. Caliban is the most vocal in his rebellion and Greenblatt reads Caliban's powerful speech in Act 1, Scene 2 as a paradigm of the colonial enterprise. At first Caliban greets Prospero and Miranda joyfully, showing them all 'the qualities

of the island' and delighting in learning their language and their culture.²⁴ However, Prospero's paternalism gives way to slavery and oppression when Caliban seeks to mate with Miranda. Caliban's thoughts are consumed with anger and rage. He asserts his rights, declaring 'This island's mine by Sycorax my mother', and rails that the only value of learning language is that he 'know[s] how to curse'.²⁵ Greenblatt highlights productions of *The Tempest* staged in former colonies in which Prospero is vilified and Caliban hailed as the wronged hero.²⁶

The postcolonial debate extends to contemporary texts written by European authors and set in colonised localities. Lloyd Jones' award-winning *Mister Pip* is an excellent example. Critics and readers concur that the novel's evocation of the multiple pleasures of reading and storytelling is deft and delightful. Teaching the novel in a third year paper on the tragic genre last year, my class felt affirmed in our own preoccupation with what the heroine Matilda terms the 'act of magic' which is reading.²⁷ However, when it came to the issue of cultural encounter and exchange in the novel our responses become more complicated and conflicting. Jennifer Lawn's excellent analysis ably highlights these ambivalences. She acknowledges that the novel 'takes up an urgent postcolonising cause by exposing the relatively little-known conflict' in Bougainville and by attacking 'the neo-imperialist corruption of governments and transnational capital'.²⁸ Yet Mr Watts' use of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* as a means of aiding Matilda and her village through a time of crisis and tragedy can also be read as a form of cultural colonisation. Selina Tusitala Marsh extends this to the novel's reception and success: 'It's a very old, very played-out story. *Mister Pip*'s global rise to fame, and its continuing canonisation of white male voices speaking for/over/through indigenous female voices is very problematic.'²⁹

Marxist

Another theoretical lens through which to examine texts is that of Marxist criticism. While some may question whether this mode of analysis has any currency in the years following the collapse of communism, prominent literary critics, such as Terry Eagleton, continue to examine the dynamics of class

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in texts. Marxist criticism follows Karl Marx's analysis of the capitalist economy as the crucial power structure in society. For Marx, the basis of this power structure is class oppression, with capitalism revolving around 'a basic antagonism between two fundamental classes': the bourgeoisie who control the means of production, and the workers, or proletariat, who lack power and access to the means of production.³⁰

Like the historicists, Marxist critics emphasise that literary texts must be examined in their social and cultural context. Literature is regarded as being part of society's superstructure, controlled by the social elite to 'indoctrinate the working classes'.³¹ Bressler argues that Marxist critics are driven by a clear purpose: '...to uncover and denounce... antiproletariat ideology and...to reveal to the working classes how they may end their oppression by the bourgeoisie through a commitment to socialism'.³²

As previously mentioned, Terry Eagleton is the most well-known and influential Marxist literary critic. I am particularly fond of the Brontës and draw on Eagleton's work whenever I am teaching *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*. In *Myths of Power: Marxist Studies of the Brontës*, Eagleton re-evaluates the work of the Brontës from his particular critical angle.³³ I find it useful to end my class discussions of the Brontës with some of Eagleton's ideas, for these serve to destabilise previous readings of the texts and to encourage students to think about the novels in fresh ways. Some students dismiss Eagleton's approach, more comfortable reading the texts from a feminist or psychoanalytic angle, but some, particularly male students, respond positively to his analysis of class and power.

Eagleton's ideas are layered and complex and those interested in his approach will, of course, turn directly to his work. I only have the space to outline some of his theories in relation to *Wuthering Heights*.³⁴ By the time we have considered the novel as a story of doomed love, transcendent nature, Gothic ghosts, and the thwarting of female rebellion, some of my male students start to challenge the relevance of the novel to them and their lives. Enter Eagleton, Marx and class. Eagleton

focuses predominantly on the character of Heathcliff, who is at first elevated to the level of Catherine and Hindley Earnshaw through his adoption by their father and then bullied and humiliated by the jealous Hindley after Mr Earnshaw's death. Heathcliff's early life can thus be read as a template of the vulnerability and powerlessness of the proletariat, who are exploited by a capricious but all-powerful bourgeoisie. To compound Heathcliff's situation, the woman he loves, Catherine Earnshaw, views him as degraded and contemplates marriage with the refined Edgar Linton. Heathcliff sees only one way to relieve his situation: the acquisition of wealth and consequent reversal of his class powerlessness. Read in this way, Emily Brontë's novel is about the rise of the outsider and the downtrodden through an embracing of the capitalist ethos of control and ownership. Yet Heathcliff is as much destroyed as saved by his social rise. He becomes what he initially despises, the novel embodying for Eagleton the evils of the capitalist ethic as both oppressive force and tainting ideology.

Feminist

Feminist approaches to literature are perhaps those with which many readers and teachers feel most familiar and comfortable. Like Marxists and postcolonialists, feminists are preoccupied with power, control and oppression, but they focus on the dynamics of gender rather than, or as well as, class and race. Susan Hekman sees the central task of the feminist critic as analysing 'how gender is constructed and maintained as one of the central meaning structures of society'.³⁵ Bressler discusses the various ways in which feminist critics do this. They seek to discover or recover forgotten and neglected works written by women, 'identify the antifeminist characterization that occurs in many texts' and 'reread the canonized works of male authors from a woman's point of view'.³⁶ (155)

My own teaching and research is certainly influenced by these aims. As a scholar of New Zealand settlement literature, one of my research endeavours is to draw critical attention to some of the early female New Zealand authors whose work has been overlooked. This current article provides a welcome opportunity to briefly further this aim. One of my favourite early feminist authors is Louisa Baker. She left New Zealand for England in 1895 and

published nearly twenty novels under the pseudonym 'Alien'. Her books are perhaps best characterised as romantic, philosophical melodramas, particularly valuable for the way in which they consider issues to do with female morality and choice, such as: is education and a career the best way to achieve fulfilment or can that only be obtained through marriage and motherhood? Should a woman leave an unhappy marriage to find self-fulfilment? Is a free-love union permissible and desirable?³⁷

When it comes to the way in which some critics deconstruct and re-evaluate the language of texts from a feminist perspective there is perhaps no better example than John Donne's poetry.³⁸ I have to confess that the romantic still trumps the feminist within me when it comes to reading Donne's poetry. I revel in his language of love and sensuality, such as in 'The Sunne Rising' where the speaker looks at his beloved in the morning light and concludes that their love is of such beauty and power that they are the centre of the universe. However, intellectually I can appreciate the view that lines such as 'She is all states, and all Princes, I' carry with them suggestions of male conquest, sovereignty and control.³⁹

In terms of teaching, feminist criticism has been invaluable in revealing the undercurrents and ambivalences beneath the witty surface of many of the romantic comedies studied in my second year comedy paper. Through the application of feminist criticism the subplot of William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* becomes more than the humorous tricking of the two stubborn lovers, Beatrice and Benedick, into revealing their affection for each other. In *Broken Nuptials*, Carol Thomas Neely argues that Beatrice and Benedick's witty words give voice to female fears about a loss of power and independence through marriage and male anxieties about betrayal and infidelity.⁴⁰ These fears and anxieties erupt in Act 4, no longer contained by the medium of wit and jest. Believing Don John's lies, Claudio rails at Hero as a 'rotten orange' and even her own father disowns her, revealing an ugliness and misogyny beneath the veneer of courtly love.⁴¹ Even when Hero's good name is restored and the lovers join their hands in a pre-marital dance, unsettling hints of patriarchal

control remain when the play is viewed from a feminist perspective. Benedick's kiss to 'stop [Beatrice's] mouth' may be indicative of his new-found passion, but given that the opinionated Beatrice does not speak again her fear of a diminishing of her autonomy has perhaps been realised.⁴²

Likewise, beneath the lively banter of Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, feminist critics draw the reader's attention to the poignant plight of middle class women of the period.⁴³ Not educated to work and not possessing any form of financial independence, marriage was a necessity for most women in this society. Elizabeth may embody the fantasy of wish fulfilment through her love match with the handsome, rich and principled Mr Darcy, but for most women Charlotte Lucas' limited range of choices was closer to reality. In accepting Mr Collins, Charlotte reflects that marriage 'was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservation from want.'⁴⁴

Psychoanalytic Criticism

The final theory I want to briefly survey is that of psychoanalytic criticism. While all of the preceding theories are related through their preoccupation with dynamics of power and the relationship between texts and the historical contexts in which they are embedded, psychoanalytic critics concentrate on questions of individual identity as they delve into the recesses of the human psyche. Bressler emphasises that Sigmund Freud's work is the 'intellectual centre of this form of criticism'.⁴⁵ Freud regarded literary texts as the outworkings of the artist's subconscious and wrote that, like dreams, texts need to be mined to discover the 'latent content' beneath the 'manifest content'.⁴⁶ His exploration of the unconscious mind and the battle between the id and the ego and his analysis of the sexual impulses which drive individuals, particularly the Oedipus complex, form the foundations of psychoanalytic criticism.⁴⁷ Karl Jung's ideas about the archetypes present within the collective unconscious and Jacques Lacan's theories about the 'mirror stage', the idealised self-love which forms the basis of the individual's first thoughts and experiences, are also of primary significance.⁴⁸

I have found psychoanalytic criticism particularly helpful this year in my teaching of Christopher Nolan's Batman films. In many ways the narrative action of *Batman Begins* is structured around Freud's theory of the realisation of the self through the death of the father. There is no sexualised mother figure or Oedipal imperative, but Bruce Wayne only completes his journey towards adulthood when he jettisons the false father figure in his life, Henri Ducard. Bruce's story began with the death of his own father, the compassionate doctor who lacks the necessary skills to save himself and his wife from the mugger's gun. The adult Bruce chooses to follow in his father's philanthropic footsteps, but embraces a more active ethic as the vigilante saviour of Gotham. The alternate father figure, Henri Ducard, who has equipped him to fight corruption with violence, is likewise found wanting. Rejecting Ducard's creed of purification through destruction, Bruce/Batman lets his former mentor die and realises his self as a man and a superhero of ethical action and moral parameters.

The crucial psychoanalytic question of 'what is the self?' permeates the Batman universe as imagined by Nolan. Freud's concepts of the id, ego and superego are useful in understanding the identity of both Batman and the villains he confronts. They all wear masks and disguises, from Scarecrow to Joker, giving their id, or instinctual, primal selves, a visible, physical manifestation and outlet. In Batman's case the Batman self is complemented by his superego, the wealthy, powerful, carefree billionaire playboy. His ego navigates the difficult terrain between these two polarities of inaction and action, visibility and invisibility, and is in danger of being swallowed by his Bat-like id. As Rachel Dawes remarks at the end of *Batman Begins* it is the playboy who becomes the real 'mask'. Yet this masked self is not just the 'monster' of Rachel's description, but is also the superhero, or variant superego.⁴⁹

My students particularly enjoyed our psychoanalytic discussions of *The Dark Knight* in which the battle between Batman and Joker can be read as a battle between this superhero superego and the id. Applying Frederick Nietzsche's philosophy of the Apollonian and Dionysian forces at work in the universe to the hero and villain of the narrative, the

film can be understood as both an individual and an ideological struggle.⁵⁰ Batman, in spite of his mask and his vigilante status, ultimately stands for order, reason, and control. This is threatened by the Dionysian energy of the id-like Joker who believes that in a world without rules or justice, in which 'everything burns', the only 'fair' agent is 'chaos'.⁵¹ The way in which these forces are played out in the individual are embodied by Harvey Dent after half his face is injured by acid and he becomes Two-Face, both id and superego, order and chaos, hero and villain. While Batman ultimately wins the day in Gotham, Dent's id erupts into a violent vengeance that destroys him.

Theoretical Application: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

I would like to finish this overview of the uses of theory in the classroom by applying the five theories I have discussed to a single text to underline my central contention: that a knowledge of theory opens up visual and written texts in fresh, exciting and multiple ways. For my case study I have chosen Robert Louis Stevenson's famous novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

The parallels between this text and Freud's theory of the ego, superego and id are even more striking than with the Batman films.⁵² While Stevenson's narrative, first published in 1886, predates Freud's *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) there is an almost uncanny overlap between the two. Dr Jekyll, ashamed of his natural appetites and desires, seeks to eliminate his id and foster his ego ideal as visionary man of science by developing a potion to separate the good and evil within the self. Freud warns of the inevitable dangers of repressing the id and Stevenson's tale exemplifies these theories. Jekyll's potion releases not pure good but pure evil, the animalistic Mr Hyde. The return of the repressed releases a 'wonderful selfishness' that becomes so liberating and addictive that it eventually cannot be contained by Jekyll.⁵³

This view of the text has close links to Stevenson's engagement with his Scottish Calvinist background.⁵⁴ Rebellious against the religion of his childhood Stevenson nevertheless continued to be fascinated with evil and the 'war between the members' described by the Apostle Paul in *Romans 7: 19-25*.

If the influence of women is removed, is the balance of social and personal interaction lost? Does the criminal, the debased, the evil thrive more readily in an environment from which women are absent?

He argues that the Calvinist desire to separate good and evil, embodied in Jekyll, will always result in hypocrisy, repression and damage to the self. Both the good and evil within must be acknowledged before the soul can be integrated, for as Jekyll comes to realise 'even if I could be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both.'⁵⁵

When it comes to a new historicist reading of the text, there are a myriad of productive contexts on which to draw. Charles Darwin's discussion of the evolutionary scale and natural selection in *Origin of the Species* (1859) both excited and disturbed the thinkers of his day. One of these was Cesare Lombroso, whose *Criminal Man* (1876) influenced late nineteenth century criminology. Lombroso posited the idea of the atavistic criminal. He turned to the popular science of physiognomy to draw links between primitive humanity and criminal activity. Thus an individual who was abnormally hairy, or possessed fleshy and protruding lips, or whose ears were of an unusual size was regarded by Lombroso as more likely to be a criminal. Lombroso also wrote that these physical features were reminiscent of chimpanzees and apes, linking Darwin's ideas about evolution to criminology.⁵⁶

Stevenson was clearly aware of these theories, as his depiction of Jekyll and Hyde demonstrates. The respectable Jekyll is described as 'a large, well-made, smooth-faced man of fifty, with something of a slyish cat perhaps, but every mark of capacity and kindness'.⁵⁷ In contrast Hyde is constantly referred to in animalistic terms as 'like a monkey', 'hardly human...something troglodytic', with 'corded and hairy' hands and 'ape-like tricks'.⁵⁸ At one point Jekyll describes his second self as an 'inorganic', shapeless, 'amorphous' entity that emerges from 'the slime of the pit'.⁵⁹ A knowledge of the contexts in which the text is grounded provide an amplified view of Hyde as criminal.⁶⁰

This leads to related Marxist and postcolonial interpretations of the text. While middle and upper class Victorian writers articulated fears of a criminal underclass, Stevenson writes a story about the crimes of a middle class man. Jekyll is a respected and wealthy doctor and, although Hyde is described by Utterson as evoking an unsettling, ill-defined

feeling of 'deformity' and 'ape-like' attributes, his tastes are clearly those of a gentleman. He relishes fine wine, furnishes his apartment with expensive possessions and dresses in well-cut clothes. Thus, for a Marxist critic, the text can be seen to challenge class perceptions of poverty and degeneracy. A postcolonial reading of the text works in a similar way. On the surface the text may appear to endorse ideas about racial as well as class hierarchies. However, the 'evolved' Englishman Jekyll is, in reality, the same being as the 'primitive' Hyde. Any sense of a racial hierarchy based on evolutionary progress is overturned and ideas about the superiority of supposedly 'civilised' man are revealed to be an illusion.⁶¹

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde is a text in which none of the central characters are women, so is it possible to provide a feminist reading of the text? Most certainly. On one occasion Hyde is described as 'weeping like a woman or a lost soul'.⁶² This has led some critics to read the text in a psychoanalytic-feminist light, interpreting Hyde as the repressed feminine that lurks within. Denial of this Jungian anima means that the feminine aspect of the self emerges in warped form. Feminist critics have also analysed Hyde as the product of a purely male environment. If the influence of women is removed, is the balance of social and personal interaction lost? Does the criminal, the debased, the evil thrive more readily in an environment from which women are absent? Is the absence of women indicative of a latent homosexuality?⁶³

The first reaction of some of my students to these multiple readings of Stevenson's texts is one of dismay. They want to know what the text means, and feel destabilised and uncertain when meanings becomes multiple. Ultimately, however, most of them respond gleefully to the array of possibilities, feeling that they too have a voice, an approach, a reading to offer. When I teach in this way my students become even more engaged with the texts being discussed and much more prepared to challenge and debate material that is raised by myself and by other class members. Most pleasingly, this process drives students back to the text in search of proof, testing their ideas against the starting point of it all: the creative imagination of the artist.

In secondary schools, as in tertiary classrooms, I believe that a theoretical approach can be useful, challenging, and liberating, a view endorsed by the Ministry's Performance Standard. This approach removes any suggestion that the teacher is the final or only 'authority'. It can empower students, beginning to open their eyes to the theoretical and ideological trends that have had, and continue to have, a major influence on how we engage with, and think about, our contemporary environment.

notes:

- 1 New Zealand Ministry of Education. (2006). *Scholarship: English Performance Standard*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p. 2.
- 2 See, for example, Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic. (Eds.) (2003). *The ISLE reader: Ecocriticism 1993-2003*. Athens: University of Georgia Press; Gene Ray. (2005). *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory from Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 3 Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle. (2004). *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. 3rd Ed. Harlow: Pearson, Longman.
- 4 Bennett and Royle, p. 20.
- 5 Bennett and Royle, p. 12.
- 6 Bennett and Royle, p. 12.
- 7 For a clear and concise overview of the range of theoretical ideas discussed in this paragraph see Bennett and Royle, Chapter 2 'Readers and Reading', Chapter 3 'The Author' and Chapter 4 'The World', pp. 9-33.
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