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Methods of Textual Analysis in Literary Studies: Approaches, Basics, Model Interpretations

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1. Why Theories and Methods? 
Introducing the Topic, Goals, and Outline of this Handbook

Considering that students, particularly those in the initial stages of their education, tend to be rather sceptical about theories and methods, one might as well begin by asking three obvious questions: Why is it important to focus on theories and methods when pursuing a course or programme in literary studies? Why are methods worth bothering with? And why should there be another volume introducing the methods of literary and cultural text analysis? In this introduction, we would like to answer these questions, define some of the key concepts, provide a brief systematic overview of the most widely used methods in literary studies, and then explain the goals and outline of this book.

* This introduction is based on a revised translation of the introduction to a German textbook we edited on methods of textual analysis in literary and cultural studies (see Nünning/Nünning 2010), for which we used and adapted some ideas and passages from earlier publications. We have expanded, revised, and updated the original German version in various ways, e.g. by including salient recent publications, e.g. Bassele (2019); Citton (2018); Eagleton (2012); Edmundson (2004); Felski (2008, 2015a, 2015b, 2016); Frow (2019); James (2015) and James/Morel (2018, 2019); Lauer (2015); McGurl (2016); North (2017); Olson/ Nünning (2013a, 2013b); Rippl (2015); Walker (2017); Wolf (2018); Zapf (2016a, 2016b). We also revised and expanded all of the original sections, and added the final section on “A Brief Outlook at New Departures: Methods and Trajectories for Literary Studies in the Twenty-First Century”.

We should like to thank Rose Lawson for her help on the first draft of the translation and Max Cannings for some helpful suggestions as well as for his careful native proof-reading of the text. We are also very grateful to our colleagues and friends Michael Basseler, Roy Sommer, and Simone Winko for sharing ideas on methods during many stimulating conversations. Roy Sommer also drafted the original version of the model in Figure 1 (p. 16), and we are grateful to him for giving us permission to use it.
A brief answer to the first two questions we posed would be: Methods are worth bothering with because they are indispensable for analysing and interpreting literary texts in a rational, scholarly, and systematic manner. Methodical textual analysis and interpreting literary texts are particular ways of doing things: Working methodically means reading and interpreting literary texts according to a specific procedure, using clearly defined concepts and technical terms, and carrying out whatever you do in an orderly way. Theories and methods, just like concepts and models, provide systematic strategies that can help solve problems in literary studies. Their problem-solving potential is also the main reason for them being indispensable for the purposes of rational forms of textual analysis and interpretation.

The main answer to the last question is that most introductions focus on theoretical approaches and literary theory but have relatively little to say about the methods that we use when analysing literary texts. In comparison to the great number of introductions to literary theory, as well as general overviews and studies of the subject, there are only relatively few volumes that focus specifically on methods in literary studies. For students it is important to know about the differences between the terms ‘theory’, ‘methods’, and ‘models’, even more so because these terms are unfortunately often used more or less synonymously, although one can and should clearly distinguish one from the other (see section 2 below).

Although the term ‘method’ with its Greek origin may sound daunting or even intimidating at first, a brief look at its etymology (i.e. the derivation and history of the word) is actually quite enlightening and reassuring: The Greek word méthode basically means ‘the way to reach a goal’, while the Latin methodus could be translated as ‘an orderly and systematic procedure that follows specific rules’ (Winko 2000a: 582; our translation). One could even go so far as to argue that the main difference between reading simply for leisure and private purposes on the one hand and the professional study of literature as an academic subject on the other is therefore summed up by the word itself.

In a university course of literary studies, it is unavoidable that students must sooner or later familiarize themselves with the most important theories and methods developed in that discipline, especially because the latter are an essential prerequisite for reading and interpreting literary texts in an academic and professional manner. This also entails an understanding of the basic differences that exist between the notions of theories, models, methods, and concepts. It is generally agreed by now that every form of scholarly insight and scientific observation is based on theory, i.e. that theoretical assumptions and frameworks are indeed indispensable, as we will explain in section 2 below. The way that people experience phenomena and gain knowledge in daily life is very different from the way they acquire scientific knowledge in that academic forms of know-