

Vera Nünning, Ansgar Nünning (eds.)

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

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Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning

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CONTENTS

1. Introducing Methods in Literary Studies: Concepts, Definitions, Overview 1

Why Theories and Methods? Introducing the Topic, Goals, and Outline of this Handbook 1 · On the Indispensability of Theories and Methods in Literary Studies: Analysing Texts and Acquiring Knowledge through Conscious, Explicit, and Systematic Procedures 7 · Theories, Models and Methods: Explaining the Concepts and Distinguishing One from the Other 12 · Spatial and Structural Metaphors for ‘Methods’ We Think and Work With: Methods as Explicit and Systematic Strategies to Solve Problems in Literary Studies 17 · Typologies of Methods and Approaches in Literary and Cultural Studies: A Schematic Overview 26 · Choosing and Using Methods in Literary Studies Wisely: On the Specificity of Scholarly Text Analysis and Interpretations 40 · A Brief Outlook at New Departures: Methods and Trajectories for Literary Studies in the Twenty-First Century 45 · Bibliography 51

Vera Nünning, Ansgar Nünning
2. Methods in Hermeneutic and Neo-Hermeneutic Approaches: A Reading of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 59

Introduction 59 · The Hermeneutic Circle: Different Conceptions of Hermeneutic Methodology 64 · Schleiermacher’s Conception of the Hermeneutic Circle 64 · Gadamer’s Concept of ‘the Fusion of Horizons’ 65 · Iser’s Theory of Aesthetic Response and Literary Anthropology 67 · A Hermeneutic Reading of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 69 · Critical Summary 76 · Bibliography 79

Ingo Berensmeyer
3. Methods of Psychoanalytic Criticism 85

Theoretical Foundations 85 · Classical Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud 85 · (Post)Structuralist Psychoanalysis: Jacques Lacan 88 · Introduction to the Methodology of Psychoanalytic Criticism 89 · Doing Psychoanalytic Criticism: Practical Steps and Procedures 91 · Categories for Analysis 1: Literary Character and Character Constellation 91 · Categories for Analysis 2: Imagery 92 · Categories for Analysis 3: Narrative Situation 93 · Categories for Analysis 4: Representation of Time 93 · Categories for Analysis 5: Representation of Space 94 · Case Study: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Berenice” 95 · Critical Responses to the Method 101 · Bibliography 103

Dorothee Birke, Stella Butter

4. “Reading Form”: A Narratological Guide to Textual Analysis 107
 Introduction 107 · Narratology as a Literary Theory: Three Goals 109 · Applied Narratology as an Analytical and Ancillary Method 111 · Narratological Readings: A Five-Step Guide 115 · Get Ready: Choose Your Tools 115 · Reading *About* Form Precedes Reading Form: Learn How to Use Your Tools 117 · Beginning Somewhere: Identify and Examine Key Components of Narrative Design 117 · Zooming In: Putting Form Under the Microscope 119 · Put on the Varifocals: Applied Narratology as an Ancillary Method 121 · Conclusion 122 · Bibliography 123
Roy Sommer
5. Methods of New Historicism and Cultural Poetics 127
 Introduction: What’s *New*? 127 · A Short History and Overview of New Historicism and its Key Concepts 128 · Introduction to the Method 131 · Model Interpretation: Joseph Conrad’s Short Story “An Outpost of Progress” 135 · Conclusion and Critique of the Method 145 · Bibliography 148
Michael Basseler
6. Methods of Feminist Literary Criticism, Gender Studies and Queer Studies 151
 Introduction 151 · Gender-Sensitive Theoretical Approaches in Literary Studies: A Brief Diachronic Overview 152 · Selected Methods 158 · Sample Analysis: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) 162 · Critique and Limits 169 · Bibliography 170
Marion Gymnich
7. Methods of Postcolonial Literary Studies 173
 Introduction 173 · Central Approaches and Their Main Methodological Implications 176 · Model Interpretation: Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* 183 · Conclusion – Some Points of Criticism 190 · Bibliography 193
Birgit Neumann
8. Close Reading and Wide Reading: Analyzing the Cultural Dimension of Literary Texts 197
 Reading the Cultural Dimension of Fiction 197 · Theoretical Approaches to a Cultural Analysis of Literary Texts 200 · New Historicism (Poetics of Culture) and Cultural History 202 · Reading Culture: The Semiotic Approach 203 · Culture as Text 203 · Interdiscursivity, Cultural Knowledge and Functional History 204 · Wide Reading: Intertextuality as a Method 206 · A Model Interpretation: Toni Morrison’s Novel *Jazz* 210 · The Plot 211 · Fictional Historiography 213 · The Urbanization of African American Culture 215 · *Jazz* as a Document of African American Historiography 216 · Intermedial References to Jazz 217 · Multiple Contextualization 219 · Limits and Relativizations 221 · Bibliography 223
Wolfgang Hallet

9.	Methods of New Sociological Approaches to Literature	229
	Introducing New Sociological Approaches to Literature 229 · Surveying New Sociologies of Literature and their Methods 230 · Theoretical Assumptions and Methods of ‘Latourian Literary Studies’ 236 · The Sociology ‘in’ Literature: A Latourian Reading of Tom McCarthy’s Fragmentary Essay-Novel <i>Satin Island</i> (2015) 239 · Conclusion and Outlook: New Sociologies of Literature and the State of Literary Criticism 244 · Bibliography 246	
	<i>Alexander Scherr, Ansgar Nünning</i>	
10.	Methods of Reception Theory and Cognitive Approaches – From Reception Aesthetics to Cognitive Poetics	251
	Introduction 251 · Presenting the Methodology 256 · Sample Analysis: Elizabeth Gaskell, <i>North and South</i> (1855) 260 · Criticism 267 · Bibliography 269	
	<i>Ralf Schneider, Deborah de Muijnck</i>	
11.	Empirical Methods in Literary Studies	273
	Introduction 273 · Theoretical Foundations 273 · Methodology 276 · Example of an Empirical Study 281 · Introduction to the Study 282 · Method 284 · Participants 285 · Materials 286 · Procedure 286 · Preliminary Findings 289 · Critique 290 · Bibliography 292	
	<i>Jan Alber, Caroline Kutsch, Sven Strasen</i>	

INTRODUCING METHODS IN LITERARY STUDIES: CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS, OVERVIEW*

VERA NÜNNING, ANSGAR NÜNNING

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. Basseler (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 *méthodos* 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-