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Method Theory: A Narcissistic Guide to Understanding Art Using Theory, Ex-Girlfriends, and John Cusack.

Preamble

My goal of this paper is to introduce the first chapter of a book and several short sections on what the other chapters will be including. Part of my larger goal was to find my voice. I do that rather well in this first chapter. While the idea of method theory is “some-what” original, (it combines reader response theory and method acting), the way that I explain it and my examples are uniquely mine. That is the key to this book and to my goal in contributing a new way to find meaning. Much of that will follow, with an introduction to “Method Theory,” a detailed look at how meaning can and should be found by allowing the reader to experience the events in the text, either through direct involvement or substituting one experience for another, similar to that of method acting, in hopes of generating a sincere, emotional response.

Included is a narrative of how the lack of meaning I found in a text changed after I experienced similar events to the text. This was the beginning of my belief that we can only truly find meaning if we have experienced what the characters experienced, either intentionally or accidentally, and either before or after reading the text.

“Method Theory” differs drastically from literary theories that typically remove the reader’s experience in order to find meaning through more artificial lenses. I will explain how that works in order to see the benefits of using “Method Theory.” Also, I will discuss how metacognition plays an important role in understanding literary and method theory.

Also, I discuss how important it is as a reader to not only find meaning but find a way to incorporate that into their life. It is rewarding to find meaning in a text but that is often the end result. What method theory hopes to accomplish is to encourage the reader to take the meaning and translate it into something that changes their life for the better.

It took my seven years to understand “Winter Dreams” by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The story is simple, ordinary, and less than 20 pages. I understood the writing. I had read “The Great Gatsby” and like most 18 year olds, it was my favorite novel (though I have since been informed by “members of the literary community” that admitting that “The Great Gatsby” is your favorite novel is admitting you haven’t read anything else since High School). But I just didn’t “get” “Winter Dreams.” I acknowledge its significance, I understand that what I was a reading was a sort of “rough draft” to “The Great Gatsby” but I would think and hope that the point of reading as a college freshman, or an adult for that matter, is more than just identifying themes. I wanted something more. I was entitled to it. I was paying for this course.

Let me start over.

I first read “Winter Dreams” during my first week as an undergraduate at Curry College in Milton, Massachusetts. I cried the night before I left. I would have joined the Air Force but I didn’t have my driver’s license. I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life. I still don’t. Perhaps when I’m 90 I’ll know. I’ll probably want to be a dancer by then. So, when I went to college I was undecided but because it was a liberal arts school I studied a little bit of everything. I was getting my English course out of the way my first semester. A year earlier, I was unfairly denied by my high school the opportunity to take an AP English course. I overheard several teachers say it was because I was too much trouble and would be a distraction to the other students. I wasn’t sure what they said exactly. I was listening through the walls while I was in detention. Ironically, I would go on to graduate with my Bachelor’s of Arts in English after a failed attempt at being a Theatre major after being cast as the “Third Watch” in “Romeo & Juliet.”

I had one line. “Here is a Friar that trembles, sighs, and weeps.” I drew rave reviews. It was snowing outside and my family came. Later that night, we all pitched in to dismantle the sight. I stole a piece of wood from the set. I still have it. I did most of the work breaking down the set, a lot more than the guy that played Mercutio did. I guess you could say as a literary student that was my first experience with...Deconstruction (that was a literary theory pun). You can steal it. I wouldn’t mention it on your first date though.

Anyways, it was one week into college when I was introduced to “Winter Dreams” after being assigned by Professor Phillip Lamb. He was an older professor who wore the kind of colorful suits like they were sold as Halloween costumes. He looked like the kind of guy who washed his face with bourbon and what white hair he had left was brushed back with “Crisco vegetable oil.” He sort of looked like Charles

Bukowski's accountant or the kind of guy who made a living smuggling in exotic animals from foreign countries. Clean but dirty, and a great professor. He taught us how to swear in writing.

"Never lead with a "fuck," build up to it. You start off with a "fuck" and now you've got to other way to shock the reader. Open with "shit."

I can't think about "Winter Dreams" without thinking about Professor Lamb. But I also think about Jake who sat next to me in that class. He would be my friend for the next four years. He introduced me to my other friend, Angus. Angus taught me how to play guitar. They were the only two people I wanted to say goodbye to when I graduated.

I remember the classroom too. Kennedy Building. The building was separate from the other academic buildings. IT was used mostly from science classes like nursing and computers. To get there from the North side of campus where the freshmen lived you had to walk about 10 minutes up several large hills. By the time you got to class the blisters in your foot were already bursting. I still have scars on the bottom of my feet from some of the terrible blisters I got there while walking up hills and in the rain. Lawsuit? Perhaps.

The edition of "Winter Dreams" that I got from the bookstore was this small anthology with some other stories and the cover was a very dark yellow. "A Soldier's Home" by Ernest Hemingway was the only other story in it that I can remember.

After Professor Lamb introduced the story we had a few weeks to read it. Since this was the first week of college and we were all freshmen and the course was just an introductory course there was nothing more we had to do but simply read it.

I read it. You should to. I'll wait.

Finished? Good.

I first read it in my bed while my roommate flushed out his sinus with one of those funnels into a garbage bin. I read it a second time in the basement of Levin Library where a few months later I read Dante's "Inferno" and heard a window shutter close and then found myself outside less than 15 seconds later.

I understood the story, though I did not find meaning in it. There is a drastic difference between understanding and meaning. One occurs on the surface; the other requires going beneath. One is simply, yet the other is much more worthwhile.

During class, I was able to recall the plot much like you probably can. Dexter Green caddies at a golf course where he meets the Judy Jones who makes him carry her clubs but he can't so she throws a tantrum and he quits. Years later, he becomes a successful businessman and returns to the golf club and meets Judy again where she abandons her date to be with Dexter and the next day they kiss and he falls for her. But later, she leaves with another man and toys with others throughout the summer all while Dexter continues to desire her. Dexter moves on and becomes engaged but leaves her when Judy comes calling once again. Of course, Judy's affection cools off and World War I calls Dexter away. We find out that Dexter becomes even more successful and Judy is married to an awful man and has lost her looks, shattering the illusion she represents for Dexter, who will never be able to capture the past.

The end. How wonderful.

But is that really the point of reading? To recall. To summarize? Is the point of reading to prove that you actually read the story? I don't think so. I think the point of reading is to find something meaningful in it. But finding meaning can only occur when there is meaning to be found. Meaning can not be made up or fictionalized. It can not be faked. It can not be found when it is not there. For me, the meaning in "Winter Dreams" was not there. I felt bad for Dexter. To want something that is so important and so close but is so far from reach must be... something. "Something" was all I could think of to describe what Dexter went through. Or, what Judy went through. I had not experienced the "something." My book of short stories was placed in a plastic storage box under my bed in my dorm room.

I hadn't had a girlfriend in high school. I did not have financial ambition like Dexter. I had nothing to long after. I had no one that made me want to be anything.

After that year, my plastic storage box went down in my basement for summer break.

And then, everything changed.

My sophomore year was much different. I was officially an English major. I was also involved in the school newspaper (ladies, please. I was taken by another). The plastic bin was under my bed again. Our professor had us go around and answer a few questions. One was to tell the class about our future plans. My answer was to write the Great American novel (whatever that means). I was like that once. I wanted to be the greatest writer of fiction of all time. Now, I'd much rather win \$10,000 grand on a scratch ticket or live off the government. But there was a girl in the class. Two seats behind me. Behind me was Sam, my future roommate. I'm still best-friends with his girlfriend. I'm like that. Behind Same was the girl. The lost girl from the fall. Her answer was also to write the great American novel. I didn't think anything of it other than that I had competition. But after class, I made the worst decision of my life. I waited for the elevator. I was too lazy to take the stairs. I think perhaps I was not wearing a belt and though my pants may fall off. Or was it because of the blisters of my foot? I can't remember. All I remember is while I was waiting for the elevator, the lost girl from the fall approached me. We started talking. We talked about books and about school. I got her number. I didn't tell her about my girlfriend. The irony here is that the elevator never came and we walked down the stairs together. I saw her later that night, and the night after, and the night after. I found out that she was the "heir" to take over a magazine that her mother ran. My girlfriend did not approve. This was the source of many arguments in the year we dated. But something about the lost girl from the fall ignited "something" in me. I spent many sleepless nights wondering about her. All the while, "Winter Dreams" lay dormant, misunderstood under my bed. But it wasn't until I lost her that I began to see. I began to understand that story. I was becoming Dexter Green. She was my Judy.

I broke up with my girlfriend to be with her but she already left school. She stayed in the area. It was now my junior year. The apartments she lived in was a converted chocolate factory. The air smelled like vanilla. Just call me Willy Wonka. Or better yet, call her Mrs. Wonka. I'm Mr. Oompa Loompa, following her every word. We grew closer that year. I slept over a few times. As she slept I starred outside her window at the intersection below watching the traffic signals turn colors. I'd watch it go from green to yellow to red, all while she slept beside me. Something so close yet so far.

(Will have narrative here about my first intro to theory and how I tried and failed to understand winter dreams with it)

After my junior year I saw her less and less. She made a few appearances in my life. Just enough to keep me in love with her but not enough to make me think she was mine. Just like Judy. After I graduated, she was living in the city. I got my first real job as a news reporter. I didn't like it. Something about interviewing people on the worst day of their life often made me feel out of place. All the while, she remained in my life. The constant in a life of confusion. Several girlfriends intervened in my life and I regretful chose her every time. She made promises that she never kept but this is not her fault. This was my fault for believing her. Over and over again, just like Dexter always believed Judy and always returned to her.

After a few years I gave up my own winter dreams. My autumn dreams. I have heard that she has moved on. She has married and has a son now. That allusion of her being next to her on sleepless nights will never return.

She probably already wrote about me. It's probably better than what I wrote. She uses a Thesaurus. I've never even won Scrabble. But this book isn't about the lost girl from the fall. It's about how I came to understand "Winter Dreams." It was only after I experienced the kind of longing, the kind of decaying hope that Dexter felt towards someone so similar to the lost girl from the fall that I found the meaning I was searching for.

I went down to the basement in my parent's house a little while after to see if I could find that old copy from Professor Lamb's class. The book is lost much like my past. I hope they both remain so. I consider my reading of "Winter Dreams" complete.

There are a number of reasons why I am writing this book other than venting about ex-girlfriends, though that will take up much of our time.

One, I would like to profit at least \$200 dollars because I really need my car detailed. I have chocolate stains on the passenger seat and no floor mats.

Two, I believe that "Literary Theory" or the systematic approach and the lenses we use to analyze text, are flawed in a number of ways, most notably the absence of the reader who plays a slightly important role when it comes to reading text.

(If a book falls in the forest and there is no one around to read it, does it even exist?)

Three, even if literary theories are flawed and the system of teaching it is established to remain so, I believe the approach that is being used to teach them to students and young adults is further ensuring their faults. For modern students come modern challenges to teaching literary theory and I intend to try and adapt theory for these students.

Four, I propose a more personal style of reading, one that requires the reader to have experienced the text before reading or rereading the text once relatable experiences have occurred. If neither of these are possible, an advanced process of "substitution" will be implemented. Furthermore, I will encourage the reader to "act upon the text," meaning to find a way to implement the text into their life. I call this "Method Theory," and most of this book will be about that.

Five, I want to encourage alternate meaning, meaning that is not universally found but unique only to you, meaning that may not even have nothing to do with the text. I want to encourage you to know that it is ok to read a text and find most of the meaning elsewhere. Maybe it makes you think of someone or something, or makes you remember a smell or a dog. "Winter Dreams" has nothing to do with feet blisters or the lost girl from the fall but to me it has everything to do with them. They are interchangeable. It means something to me that probably doesn't make any sense to you but then again, perhaps that story means something to you that I wouldn't understand and wouldn't dare try to argue with.

Six, from literary theories to Harvard University to fucking "Beowulf," there is a sense that reading should only be done on an "academic level" which for this purpose is anything that involves a student and higher thinking than simply saying "I enjoyed this book" or "That poem was good."

(Although, let me just get this out of the way and say that there is nothing wrong with saying that something is "Good." Some of the best things in life are simply "good." Needing to say something more is only used to impress others of your vocabulary. For me, there are things that are just "good.")

Academics has killed the joy in reading. Academics wants you to read complex literature and make insightful points in criticism. They want you to use literary theory to be someone else.

There are people who brag about having thousands of books and being "well-read" (which doesn't make any sense) in Russian classics, Anglo-Saxon prose, Shakespeare but its ok to just enjoy a few books. Hundreds, maybe even just a dozen or so that are your favorite and you find no reason and need no excuse to enjoy and revisit later because there will always be a later, a new reason to read it, and new meaning to find, for you may read the same book one hundred times and each time you visit it as someone new, for better or for worse.

Also, feel free not to pay any attention to this. I'm making all of this up as I go and the things that I do know like Literary Theory I'm just about one or two lessons a head of you so that it seems like I'm the teacher. I didn't go to Harvard University, but I feel like there's a real lack of parking there so I'm pretty glad I avoided that. I've never read anything by James Joyce but I lie and say I do. I tell people I read that horrible book of his "Ulysses" but all I do is recall the ploy of Homer's "The Odyssey" which I also never read. I've seen a really bad made for TV movie about it and also "The Simpson's" did something about it and "O' Brother Where Art Thou?" also has the same plot so there's really no point of me reading it at this point. Also, I've never been on an odyssey. I've never really left my hometown. Never needed to be the hero or find my way back home. I've never lead an army. I really enjoy being a follower. I've never had a love wait for me. I'm not really sure I'm worth waiting for. Maybe that's why I've never read it. It doesn't mean anything to me.

That reminds me of "The Smiths" song, "Panic."

"Burn down the disco,
Hang the blessed DJ,
Because the music that they constantly play,
It says nothing to me about my life."

That's the reason I haven't read it. James Joyce says nothing to me about my life. I'll have to throw myself into one of his stories to understand it and to take something back. I'll have to have an odyssey to understand "Ulysses."

Wait, did I just make a point? Am I teaching something? Fuck.

Method theory begins where literary theory leaves off. Literary Theory is simply the systematic approach to analyzing a text. Nothing more than that. (Yes, I'm aware that there is more than that so don't rescind my invitation to the literary theory luncheon). Just for now, picture an eyewear retailer. Imagine all the different lenses. Each lens represents a different theory. When you wear the glasses, you see the world through those lenses. That's what theory is. You wear the lens, the guidelines, and the principles of the theory to analyze theories.

There are a lot of theories. This is a complex world. But most of those theories are off-shoots of a main group.

Mary Klages in "Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed," (which is what I am and probably what you are) lists nine theories that are worthwhile.

Humanist theory, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, Feminist and Queer, Marxist, Post-Colonialism and colonialism, and Post modernism and modernism.

Using the same order as above, these theories are used to analyze and find meaning in text through looking at the text in close detail, viewing the structure and operation of the text, the roles of the signifier and signified of the language, the concealed meaning of the writer and/or characters, the roles of women, sexuality, and members of the LGBT, the political, social, and economic classes, the study of and effects of culture and human legacy, and cultural trends and changes.

Though these theories are important and serve as the basis for the shape of reading comprehension and the discovery of meaning in text for just about as long as text has been around, they are each the same in two very, negative ways.

One, they do not allow the reader to be themselves. Their meaning is stuck behind the lens of another. We need to cite sources. We do not cite our own experience. Which is more valuable I wonder? The value of another or ourselves?

Two, even when meaning is discovered, there are no guidelines in using the meaning. The meaning does not leave our thoughts and is only put into action if and when we write about it or discuss it. There must be a way to change our lives based on the meaning we find.

That leads us to reader-response theory. This allows the reader to be in control. To explain their meaning and interpretation of the text using a number of ways, including reading and life experience. While this satisfies the first fundamental flaw of literary theory, it does little to encourage readers to act on their meaning, nor does it offer a way to find meaning in work if there is no life experience that is applicable between the reader and the text. That is where Method Theory begins. It begins with the reader taking charge of the text without being afraid of being themselves.

Looking ahead:

What it looks like to apply each theory to different texts.

Demonstrating the difference in the value of using literary theory with and without personal experience

Making the claim that we have the right to apply life experience to every theory. Making literary theory our own.

Method Theory is the belief, however skeptical theorist may think it is, that in order to understand a text the reader has to have already experienced it, needs to experience it, or find a way to substitute a similar experience. This will enable the reader to find true meaning, rewarding meaning, and individual meaning that ensures the text will be everlasting and capable of new meaning based on the individual.

For example, to try and find meaning in Jack Kerouac's "On The Road" a reader will need to have experienced similar events in the book, such as a cross country road trip, hitch-hiking, Jazz, sex, or drug use. While people are more than allowed to try and find meaning in this text without having to experience the events in the book, such as abuse drugs, all Method Theory is trying to do is to make it ok to discuss your personal connection to a text without having to apologize for doing so. Those who have experienced those events have the ability, perhaps even the obligation, to bring their meaning to the text, meaning that many of us don't have the ability to understand. This is also a way to bring authenticity to a text and to keep text alive. This is one way that Method theory differs from literary theory. If literary theory uses the same principles, meaning will be the same. With method theory, a person's own experiences will always be different from someone else, thus allowing for unique, enriching meaning.

Method theory also gives permission to the reader to apply individualism to each theory that I mention in the individual section. This intention isn't to diminish the principles of the theory but to gain the attention of the reader, and in this case the student, whose attention will not be lost if they are encouraged to apply their own uniqueness to the theory. Also, and somewhat controversially, this lens may encourage readers to only read texts that they are already familiar with and avoid text that they can't relate to.

While this contradicts what many believe is the purpose of reading, which is to learn new things and let the text take you on a new journey, I am simply purposing that it's OK not to want to do that for the benefit of the individual. Books are there for you. You have the right not to want to read something.

Looking ahead:

Ways to find meaning in books that we cannot experience, such as Harry Potter, Beowulf, Dr. Seuss...

Defending the stance that not wanting to read certain books is ok

Encouraging text that “fit in” with a person’s life, such as text for working class...

More about “substitution,” the act of finding related experiences to text that are not precisely the same but elicit similar meaning.

While literary theory and method theory can be used to find meaning in text, only metacognition can ensure that the reader understands how to find the meaning and why it is important.

Metacognition defends what you think you know.

Lisa Schade in “How Does It Mean? Literary Theory as Metacognitive Reading in the High School English Classroom” discusses how metacognition takes literary theory to the next level.

Becoming a “critical reader” also means becoming aware of the ways in which one ‘judges’ a text. This is possible when the reader is metacognitively aware of his/her schemas, the stance he/she assumes in approaching a text, and the underlying assumptions and values explicit to the text and in developing his/her reading of it” (2002).

As Metacognition is thinking about thinking, this approach ensures the student that they understand the principles of the theory, understand what to do when they need to use Method Theory, incorporate examples of texts that require a theory to analyze, and then include metacognitive questioning that students will use in order to defend their findings.

“When students become cognizant of the strategies they use for constructing meaning from text, they can begin to question the cultural and ideological influences at work in a text, as well as the influence of their own values and beliefs in the transaction that produces meaning. Teaching theory extends methods of reading and literature instruction to the level of criticism by further expanding students’ repertoire of strategies for analyzing meaning” (2002).

Literary theory often ends once a reader discovers meaning, but metacognition can allow them to further develop meaning. One example would be to try and find meaning in “The Great Gatsby” using Marxist theory. This lens is used to identify social, economic, and class identities and conflicts. These identities and conflicts are rather obvious in the novel, from the physical and economical divide of “East Egg” and “West Egg” to the extravagant parties Jay uses to lure Daisy to the “valley of ashes.” Marxist theory will allow the reader to identify that to find specific meaning in the text though that does little to guide the reader in understanding how they found that meaning. Yes, of course a reader who is capable of reading “The Great Gatsby” will likely be familiar with these characteristics but being able to use Metacognition and realizing the reason why they are able to identify them is important. For instance, I am more sympathetic towards Jay because he made his own financial success rather than many other

characters who inherited their wealth. I KNOW this (metacognition) because of myself and my families work ethic and determination to make something out of nothing. Being able to know this means more than just understanding how to use literary theory.

Looking ahead:

Specifically, stated principles of “Metacognition” and their application, including real life examples.

Examining the roles and methods teachers and theorists are already exploring when attempting to teach theory to modern students.

Develop a curriculum or simply steps (if the reader of this book is not an active student) to allow them to engage with the topic without becoming overwhelmed.

After understanding how to use Method Theory, the next step is just as important. Find the meaning and let it lead you to action.

This is perhaps the most important distinction between method theory and literary theory. Literary theory helps you find meaning. Method theory helps you change your life. Understanding of literary theory is proven through discussion or academic papers. Though this is important and with metacognition can prove the understanding and usefulness of literary theory, it does however signal the end of the usefulness of literary theory.

Yes, while it is true that understanding a theory and meaning will always be useful we must strive to never stop at the discussion and encourage readers to “do something” with the meaning they now have.

If Marxist theory, through a method theory approach, helps a reader empathize with a certain character, perhaps someone who represents more working-class values than the reader, then they should consider a similar career or life decisions.

If Feminist/method theory helps a reader find meaning in the social norms of a text, perhaps that is a cause they should take up.

Whatever the meaning is, a reader must stop becoming a reader and start becoming a person of action. The meaning that we find should lead us in a positive direction.

Looking ahead:

Real examples of others who were successful in translating meaning into action.

Most notably- members of the working class who discovered pride or courage through a work, people “down and out” who were able to rise up, people who were able to change paths.

My own narrative and examples.

Principles and steps to link meaning and action.

Method theory works for a number of reasons. First, it places the reader at the center of the text. No longer does the reader need to apologize for their interpretation, have to settle with using another source to find meaning, or be forced to have an experience that is simply not interesting or meaningful for them.

Second, it makes use of the meaning. Without direction, a reader of a text will have fulfilling meaning but will not know what to do with it. With method theory, they will be encouraged to act on the meaning and bring it into their life.

Many will think this theory is harmful, narcissistic, unwise, and contradicts many aspects of literary theory and reading. However, after careful application, it can produce unique, fulfilling ideas that are produced from a passion such as literature and help craft a greater life.

Looking ahead:

Need more of a narrative to have a better conclusion

Including examples of how I find meaning and how I can use it for change.

Books, films, music, television, art... that I can use to develop exercises

Taking Stock

What just occurred is a look at where I am and where I am lost. I have a good idea of how to properly explain method theory but not sure if I can sustain a narrative that is both entertaining and educational. What I must do as the creator of this theory is to put it into use through a series of stories centered around a single text.

While it is beneficial to the reader to show demonstration through multiple texts (and I will be incorporating many texts throughout this book to explain certain parts of this theory when necessary), it may be more simple and beneficial for both the reader and I to follow along together through one text.

I was thinking about “Infinite Jest” by David Foster Wallace, a book I have never read though I have owned a copy for nearly a decade. It once even served as my coffee table (its 1067 pages long). I have been hesitant to read it for a number of reasons besides length, most notable my inclination that there is anything in it that will be meaningful to me. But I believe I can find that meaning using my own theory and incorporate aspects of the book into my own life, generating experiences, and being able to empathize with the characters in the book, and find meaning.

It seems this idea fulfills three important lessons I learned in “692: Research and Engagement:”

- 1) Trust the process: What follows is not a complete understanding of theory or method theory, but evidence that I must allow the process to unfold. I may not even know the power of this idea until I reach the conclusion, which is why my conclusion as of right now cannot be completely fulfilled. Trusting the process does have a silver lining. I should not allow myself to be frustrated at the lack of results, or if it takes longer than expected to find the right answers. I must trust that something good will come from all of this.

- 2) Listen: While I continue to add the contributions made by other writers and theories, I must remind myself of their worth. While I have found my own voice and much of my narrative is unique, much is built off experiences with people, places, and moments that have enormous value to this book.

- 3) Teach: I will use method theory, my life experience, and “Infinite Jest” to help teach others how to find deep meaning in text. There are themes, ideas, identities, characteristics in “Infinite Jest” and other text that are both important for us to understand how to find meaning within the works but also important for us to actually experience. By teaching how to find meaning in these texts, I can teach someone how to change their life.

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