



DC English IV

World/British Literature

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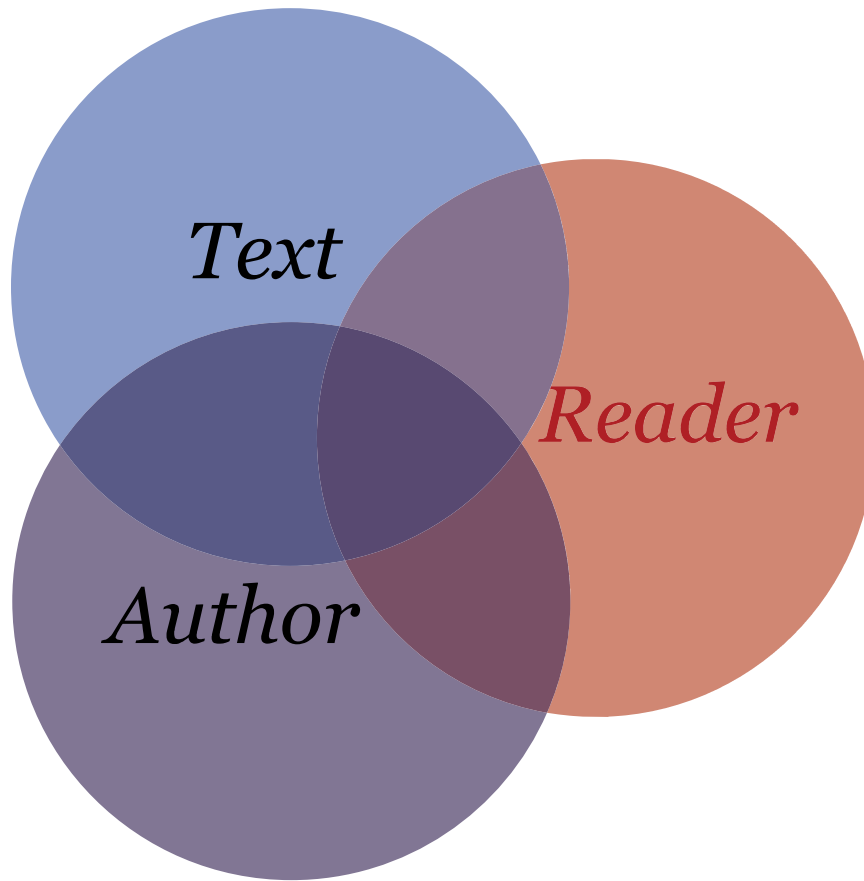
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Diverse Literary Criticism



Sei Shōnagon (c.966-c.1017), “Squalid Things”

The back of a piece of embroidery.

The inside of a cat’s ear.

A swarm of mice, who still have no fur, when they come wriggling out of their nest.

The seams of a fur robe that has not been lined.

Darkness in a place that does not give the impression of being very clean.

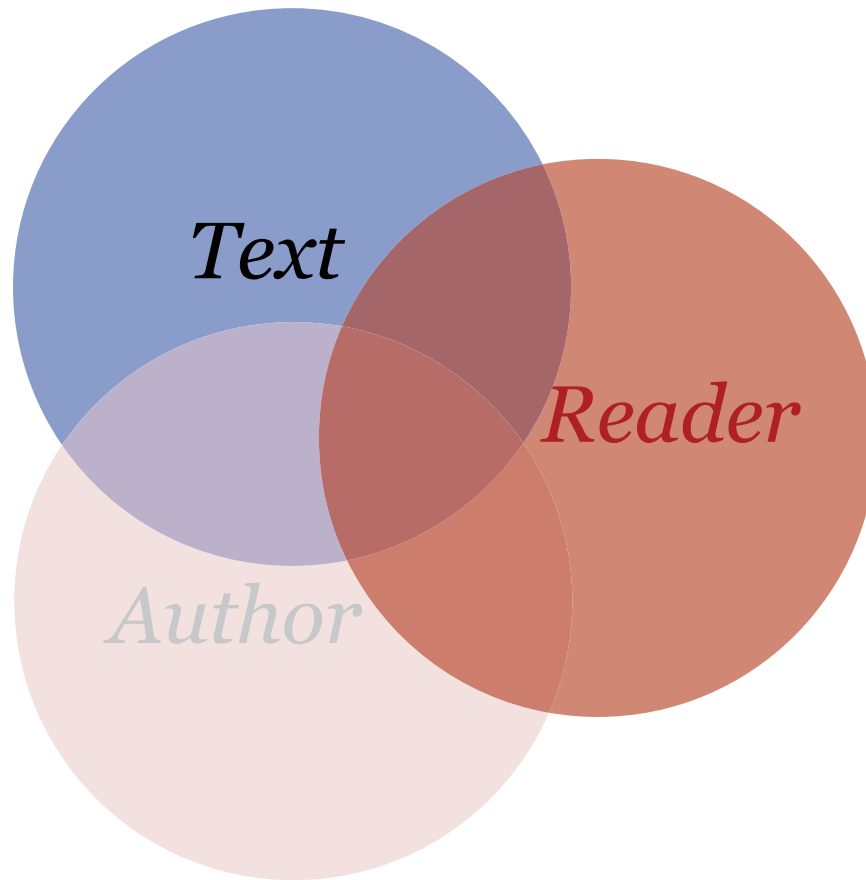
A rather unattractive woman who looks after a large brood of children.

A woman who falls ill and remains unwell for a long time. In the mind of the lover, who is not particularly devoted to her, she must appear rather squalid. (170)

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Readers Response



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Emphasis is placed on the reader/critic’s interpretation of the text.

By examining the reader’s reactions, a value is placed on the importance of the text.

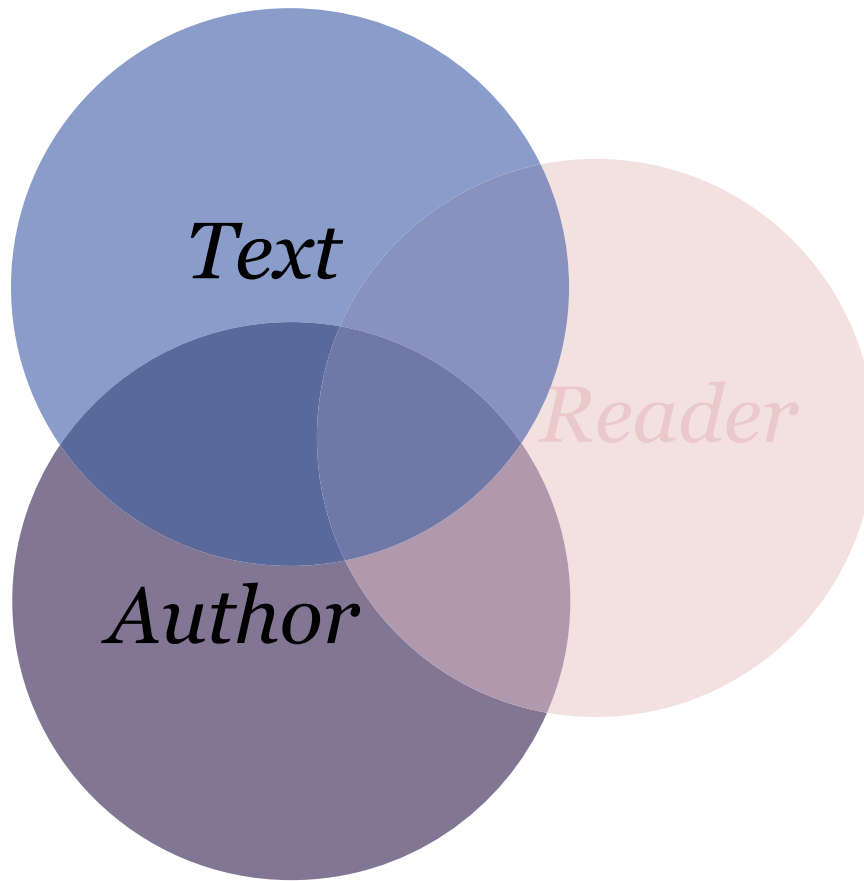
Similar to a informal book report or a formal book review, these critiques are expected (but not required) to be personal.

As a result the “I” voice is allowed.

rough formula: 2/3 objective; 1/3 subjective

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Biographical



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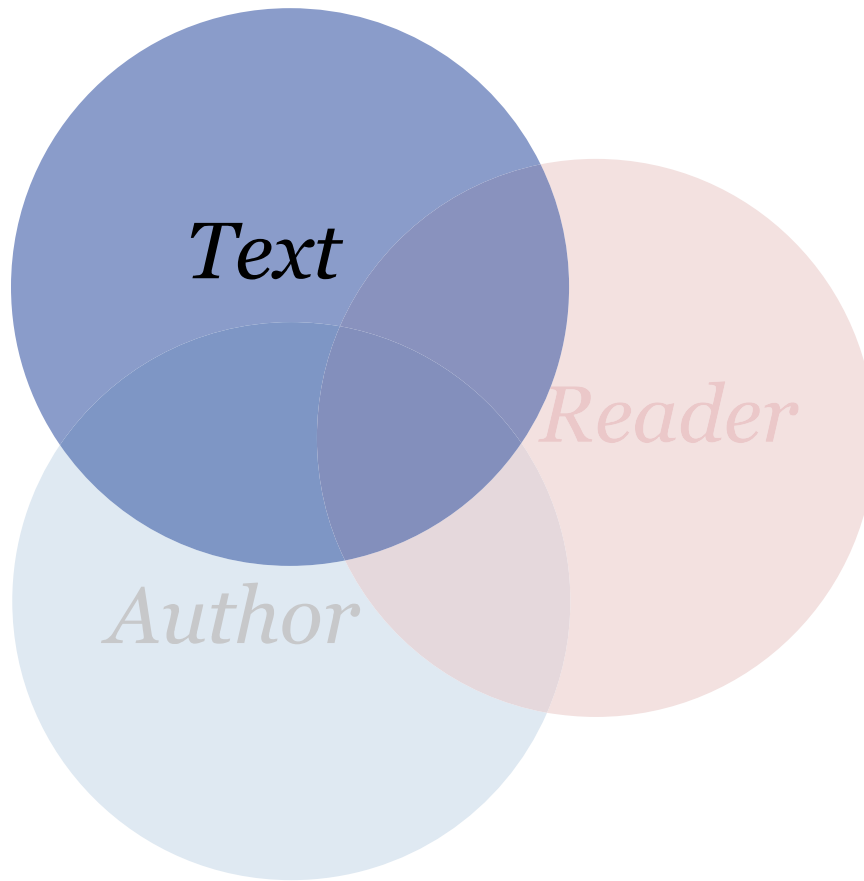
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Emphasis is placed on author’s life and how evidence of their life can impact creation of the text. By examining the author’s life, a deeper understanding can be gained regarding his/her writing.

Shōnagon was a lady in waiting at the Imperial Courts for the Emperor and the Empress. Her writings were considered highly-valued and she was in favor with the Empress.

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Formalist



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Shōnagon left behind numerous journal entries covering a numerous of subjects.

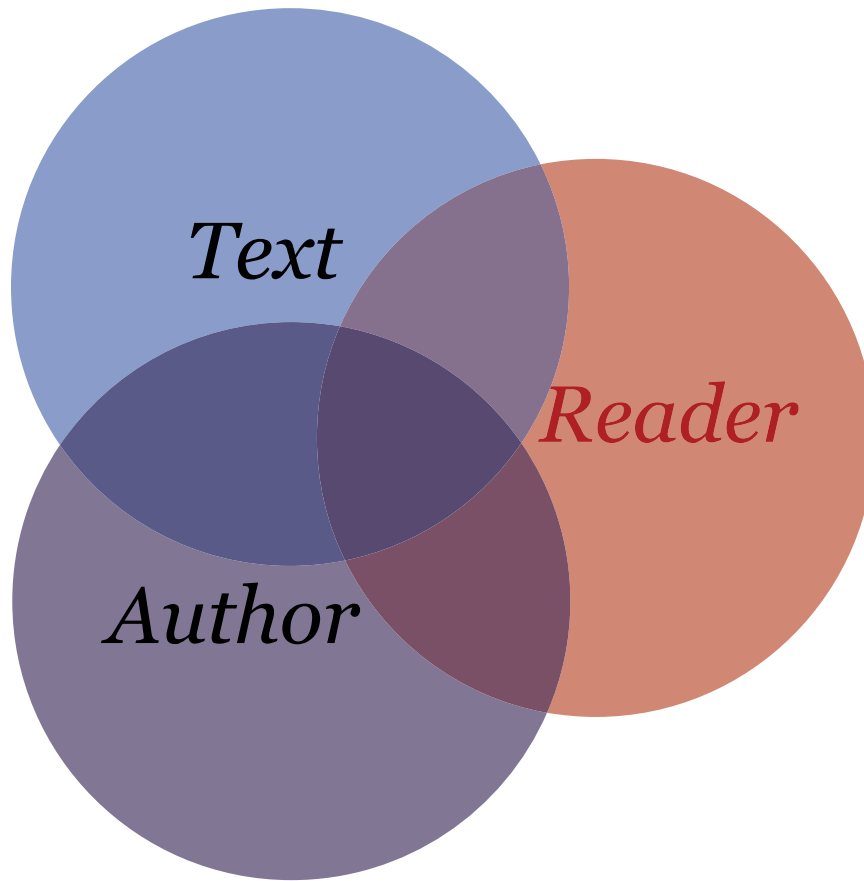
Her style of journal writing is a popular Japanese-medieval genre titled: *Zuihitsu*.

This type of writing reflects a personal collection of miscellaneous ideas; can be contradictory; random jottings.

- presented in an essay-like style and organization
- can include lists, observations, poetry, reflections, journal entries—all in a variety of combinations; notice these are all *personal*, honest declarations of a writer
- emotional *reactions* to a theme, or a series of random thoughts on a theme

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Gender



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The mice are recently born.

How is the woman of lower class portrayed? What if she were replaced with a male figure?

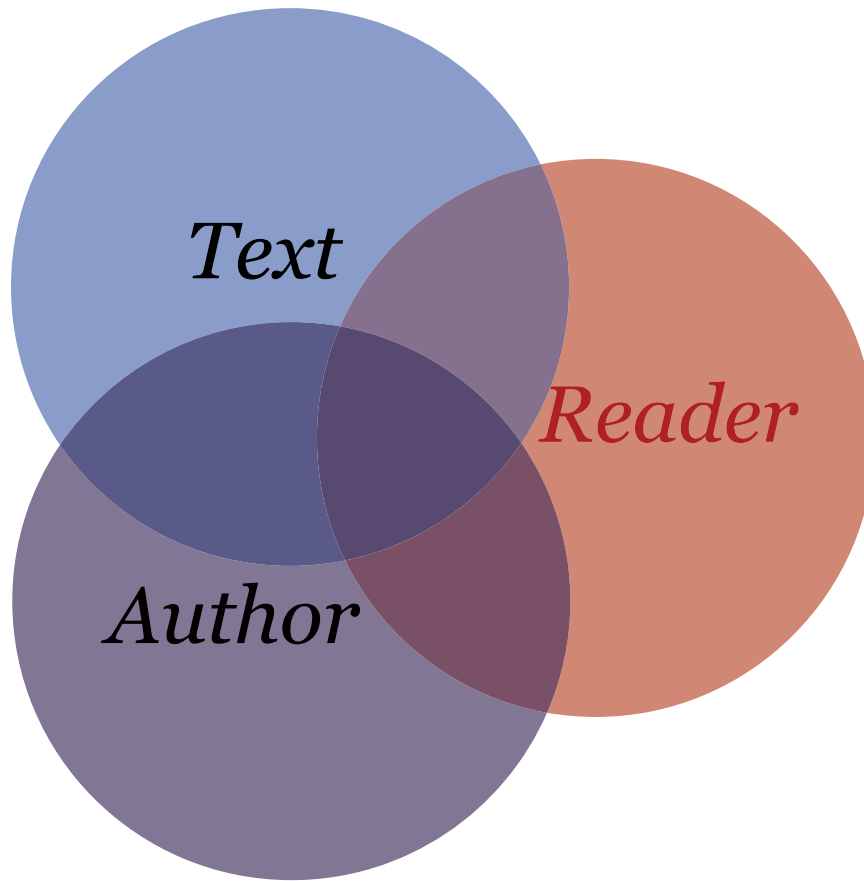
What if the final sentence dealt with a man who was ill? How would his female lover react to him?

Why do the list of items within the entry seem female-centered as far as theme?

*Ideologies of all three elements **can** come into play.*

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Why are the presented circumstances presented towards a male dominate culture?

Is the narrator clearly female? How does the narrator feel about the status of women in this culture?

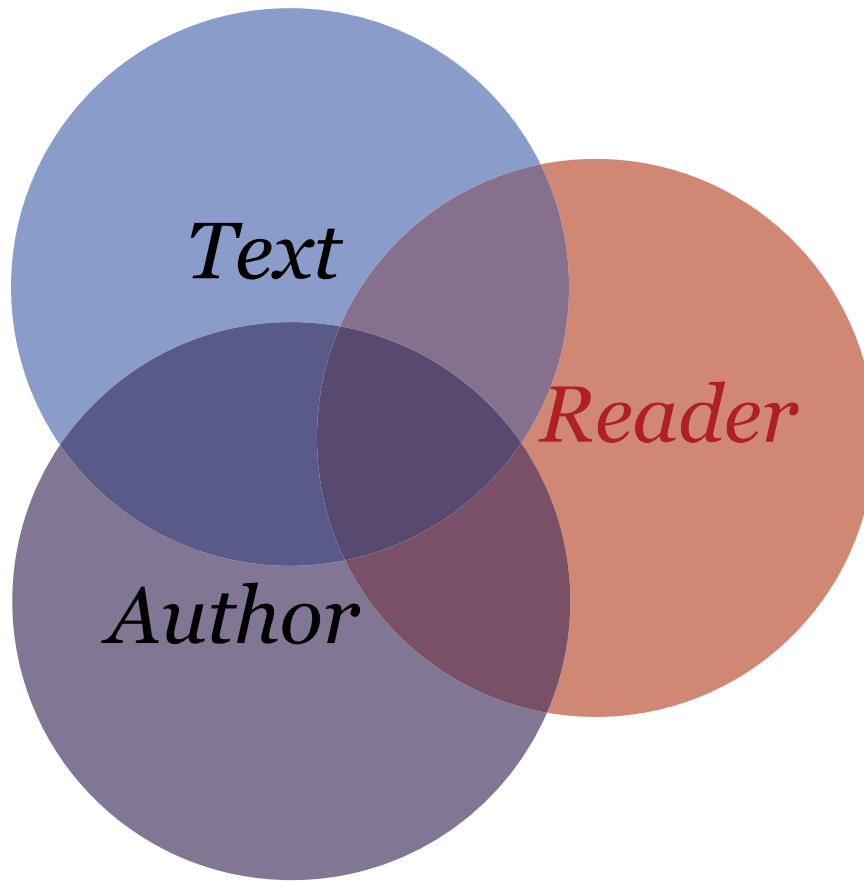
Why would a woman be forced to be the caregiver of the “large brood of children” and not a male figure?

Why does the character of the ill woman and the narrator apparently concerned with the appearance of the female in the first place?

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Mythic/Archetypal



What possible archetypes exist within the journal entry?
How does the condition of cleanliness and filth tie in with the various archetypes?
Is the unattractive woman obviously a mother?
Is she a “good mother”?
Are all of the presented images typical female-centered?
How do the combinations of archetypes connect and work within the piece?
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Mythic/Archetypal

Mythic or **Archetypal Criticism** deals mostly with the use of imagery and **symbolism**. This lens centers on the fact that every individual is **subconsciously** affected by universal symbols and personality types.

Archetypes are similar to the constructions of **stereotypes** and **epitomes**.

Based on ideas begun by Carl Jung's psychological theories, the criticism itself was further developed by Joseph Campbell and also later by Northrop Frye.

To take this to another level, an American literary theorist, Kenneth Burke, in a 1964 issue of *The Hudson Review*, defines humanity as: "the symbol using, making, and mis-using animal" ("Definition of Man"). In part, the article aims to clarify what metaphoric interpretations are developed in our species.

Keep in Mind:

- By analyzing plausible symbols in a story helps examine literature as a whole and brings a closer understanding of how written expression actually works.
- In fiction, any image within a story can be argued as an intentional **or** subconscious symbol on the part of the author.
- All artists are influenced by universal symbols which have been developing within society since humanity first developed advanced thinking processes.

symbols > themes > message

In simplest terms, these are patterns, characteristics of **personality traits which appear in fiction**. Northrop Frye, a Canadian literary critic, took the original Jungian concept of psychoanalysis, then applied it to writing and criticism.

He believed every concept which is re-invented in literature has a mythical origin which humans, as an analytical species, carry within their subconscious.

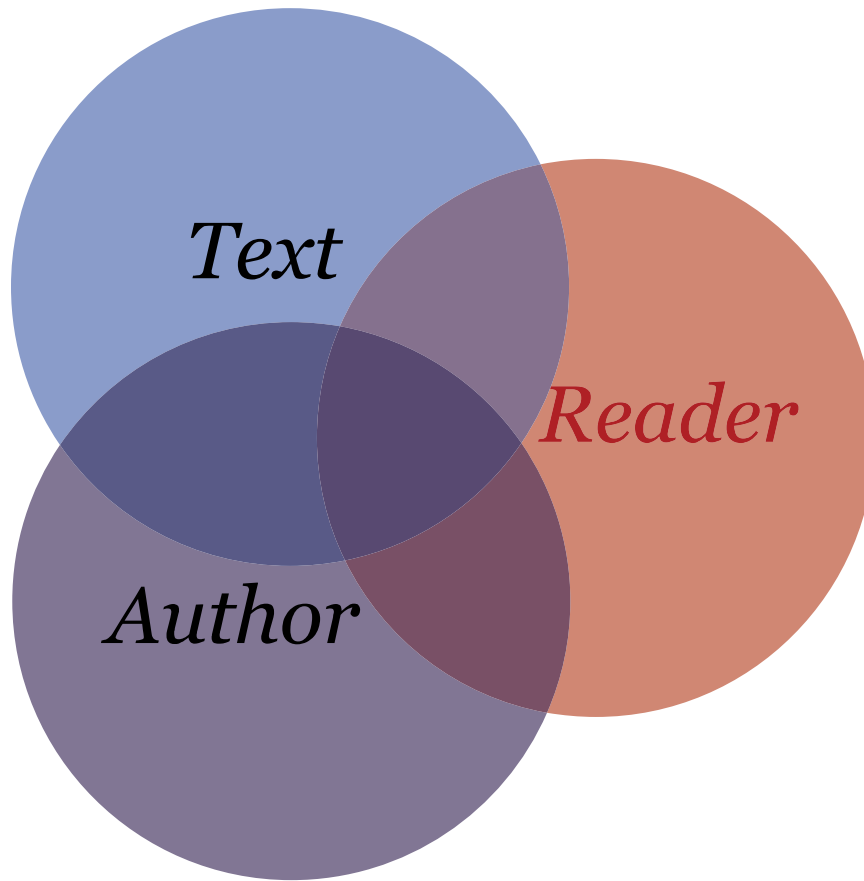
In this regard, one can examine characters and actions within stories, based on the classification and defining of these type of symbols.

some random examples:

- the hero
- the hero's quest/journey
- the princess
- the runaway, rebellious daughter
- the good mother
- the evil stepmother
- the wise old man
- the maiden (virgin)
- the fool-comedian
- the scapegoat (pariah)
- the lover (soul-mate)
- the whore
- the demon-lover
- the shadow
- the double

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New Historicism



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How does the cultural history of Sei Shōnagon, as a Japanese medieval woman of high class affect the meanings of the text? Is the culture of medieval Japan reflective in the writing?

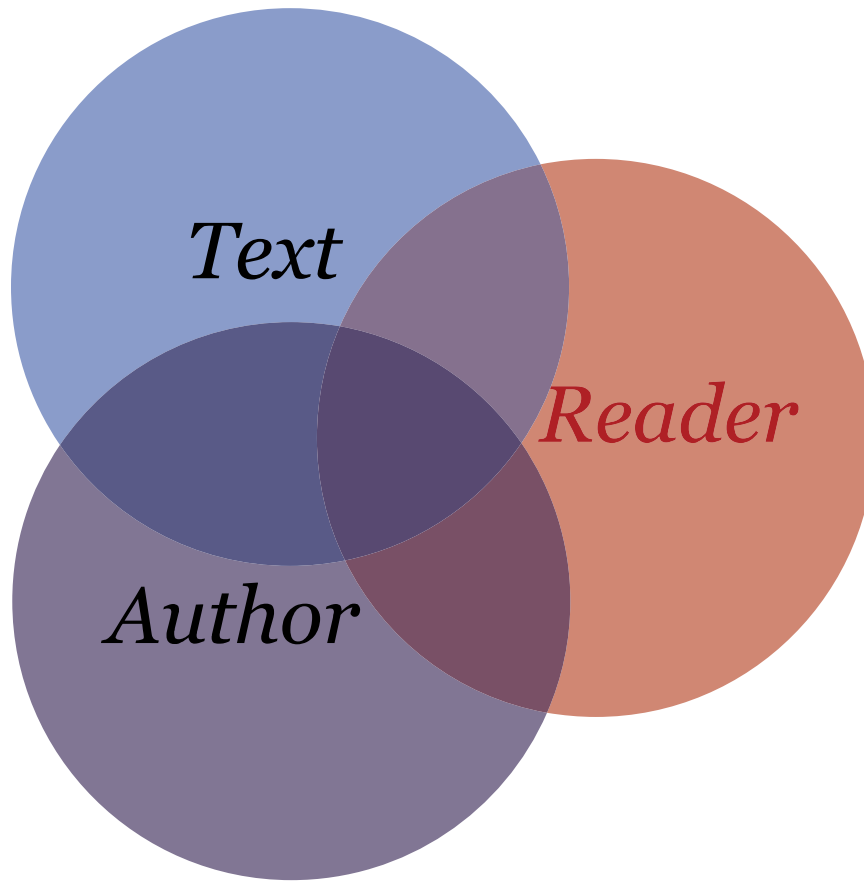
What historical events of significance are going on in Japan?

How does the ideology of an American reader affect the meaning of a Japanese medieval text?

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Psychoanalytical



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Why is the narrator apparently obsessive with cleanliness?

Why is she obsessive with the female perspective on cleanliness?

What is the symbolic connection between a “swarm of mice” and “a large brood of children”?

Is there Freudian yonic symbols within the work? (mice, cat, fur robe, darkness, sickness)

Why is the narrator apparently oppressive towards the lower classes?

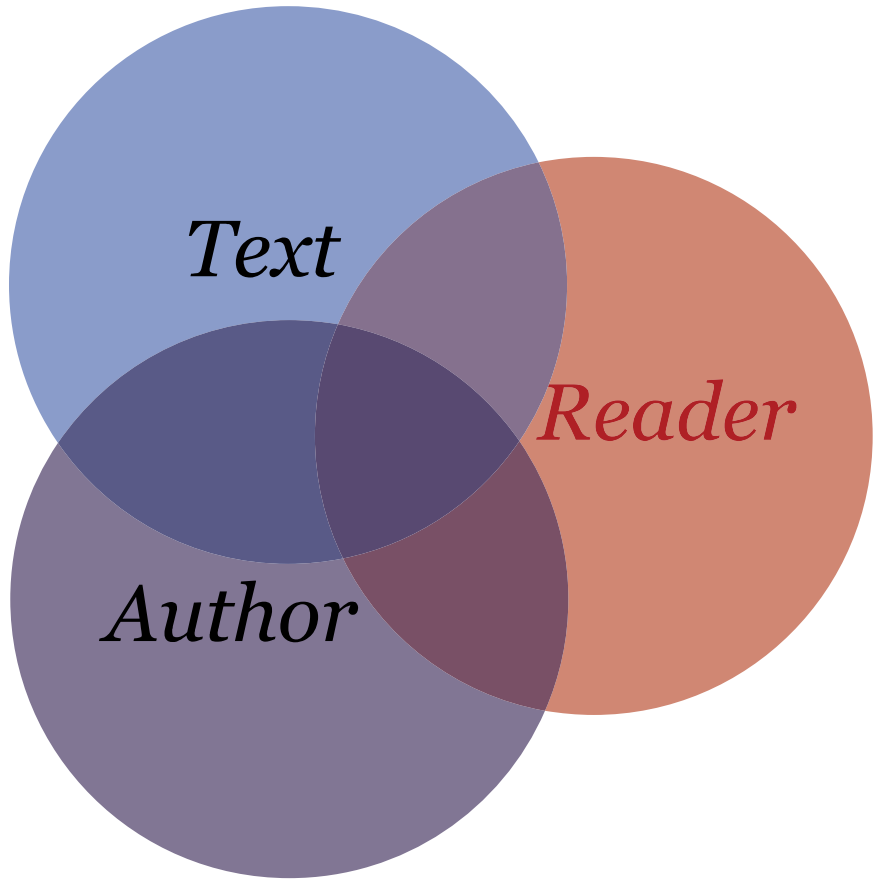
Why is the ill woman caught up in the dominant/submissive relationship with her partner?

Why are her apparent looks an important reference for emphasis?

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Sociological / Marxism



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In this situation, similar to Freudian, it is important to examine how the narrator, an apparent woman of class, seemingly looks down upon a woman of lower class. Is the location of “darkness” located in a lower-class dwelling?

How would a woman of upper class be familiar with an atmosphere of lower class? Does a classicist bias exist here?

Is the lower classed, unattractive woman less valued than the upper class, ill woman?

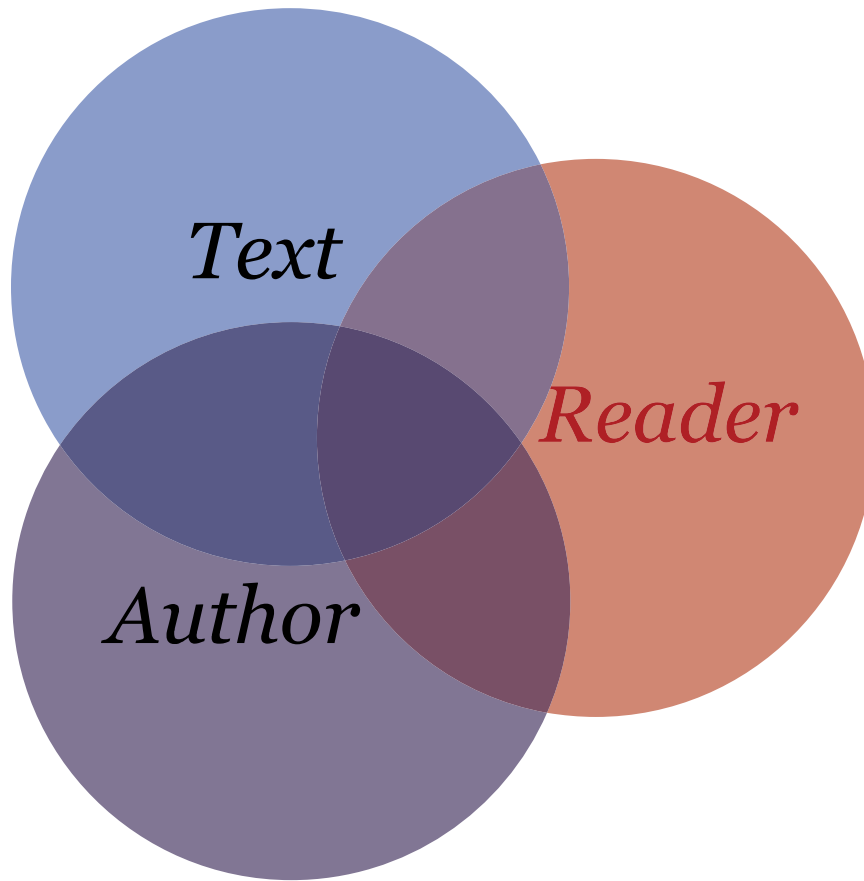
Would they be of equal value in the lover’s eyes?

The ill woman is also controlled by the notions of her looks and her value to the male figure. She does not exhibit self-worth.

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Queer Theory



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What gender is the lover? Why do we assume it is a male?

Why do we assume the narrator is a female?

Does it matter if gender identification is switched?

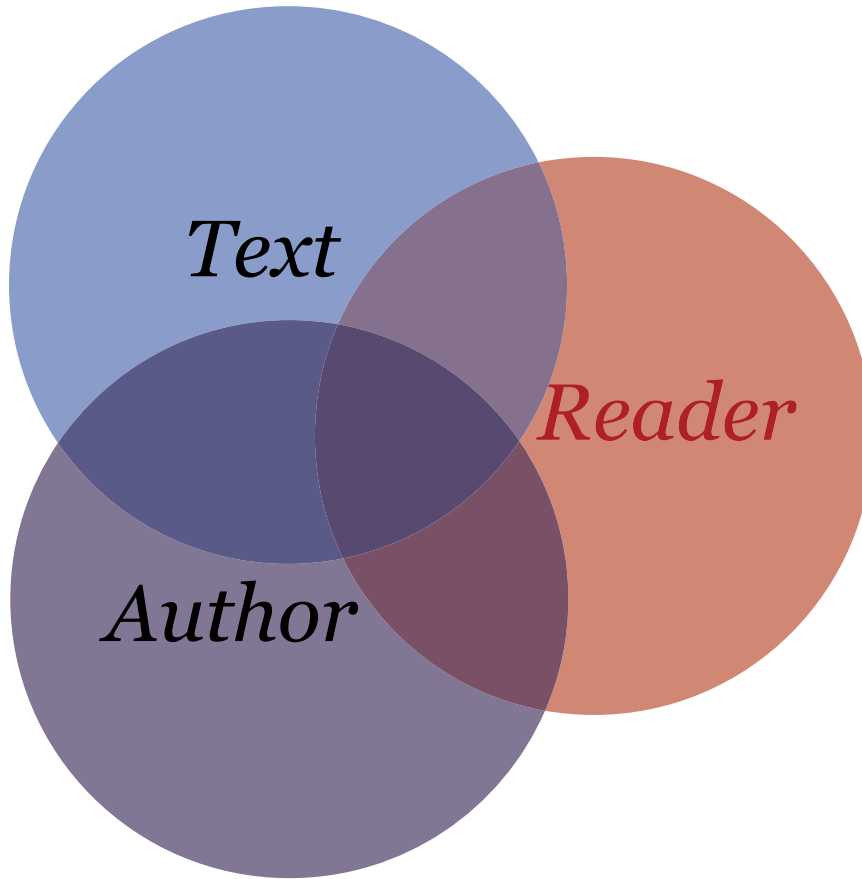
Could a female lover view a female companion in the same shallow manner as a male companion?

Would a male companion treat a male lover in the same fashion as presented?

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Deconstructionism



Keep in mind, language itself is controlled by interpretive meaning.
Any of the supplied lines from “Squalid Things” can be deconstructed.
(To keep the demonstration simple, I have concentrated on the
bottom two items.)

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Deconstructionism

Is the narrator implying all women are unclean?
Would this designation include herself?
Is the unattractive woman limited to a status of being a “non-woman,”
due solely to her looks?

2

How does any society define or label a female as a “woman”?
How is the narrator defining the role of a woman in general society?
How does a definition of “woman” from Medieval Japan affect the modern
understanding of existence as a female?

Is the full commentary a negative bias against the status of being female?

If the purpose of a woman is to bear children, wouldn't this be a
defining element of classification for females?
Why is the narrator allowed to be labelled as a woman if she herself
apparently does not have children?

With the use of the word “unattractive” what value of attractiveness is
being stressed by the narrative voice?

Clues within the sentence imply the woman is lower class, but the reader
is left to infer the class status.
Why is this point **not** established by the author?
What is gained by the vague imagery?

Can the interpretation by a male, English-native translator act as
a contraction of meaning for Sei Shōnagon's writing overall?
Does the work of Ivan Morris carry any validity in this case?

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