

DIGITAL THEME ANALYSIS

SHAWNA ROSS

T H E B A S I C I D E A

The digital humanities are ushering in a new golden age for the analysis of theme in literature.

But
**WHY
THEME?**

And
**WHY
NOW?**

**IT
SOUNDS
SO OUTDATED**

**THEME IS THE
INVISIBLE BEDROCK
UPON WHICH WE BUILD
SUPERSTRUCTURES OF
FAR FLASHIER
APPROACHES.**

THEME ANALYSIS WILL BE YOUR BEDROCK IF YOU



*Acknowledge when you
rely upon theme to make
your argument*

*Weigh the powers and
risks entailed by theme
analysis*



*Understand how digital
literary criticism resembles
and departs from
traditional criticism*

*Regard theme analysis as
a methodology shared by
both traditional and digital
literary criticism*



*Combine theme analysis with
other literary approaches to
understand your given text*

TRADITIONAL THEME ANALYSIS

The critic reads closely to find a pattern...

- events
- diction
- characters
- symbols
- contexts
- ideas


...then attributes explanatory power to it.

Instances of the theme are
collected, collated, and
supplemented with further
research.


*And as a result, an isolated observation that
no readers could possibly respect or support...*

There sure are a lot of
conversations about
pride in this play!

...begins to look like a sophisticated argument



This text perceives and critiques a
major shift in the role played by
public demonstrations of personal
pride within ancient Greek
constructions of political authority.



DIGITAL THEME ANALYSIS DOES THE SAME THING

Now with added automation!

THE BASIC IDEA

Digital theme analysis uses computational methods to locate, explore, and substantiate critical arguments about theme in a literary text. By partially automating the analysis, the critic intends to improve the scope, efficiency, and objectivity of a literary argument.

But
WHO CARES?

And
WHY ME?

IT SOUNDS UNNECESSARY

EVEN PARTIAL AUTOMATION CAN FEND OFF CLAIMS THAT YOU ARE CHERRY-PICKING, AGENDA-PUSHING, OR EXAGGERATING.

SO GIVE IT A TRY! D.T.A. SHOULD GO A LITTLE LIKE THIS

one

Determine your research question and define the parameters for an acceptable answer in terms of scope, format, and granularity.

two

Review the available digital tools. Select one that:

- ✓ *Fits the research question*
- ✓ *Can handle your data*
- ✓ *Generates results that are reliable and reproducible*
- ✓ *Does not need resources you do not have.*

four

Prepare your data.

Gather it, check it, clean it up, and transform it into a format that your chosen digital tool is able to process.

three

Train yourself how to use the digital tool you have chosen. Seek out documentation and discussion boards or fora for help.

five

Submit your data to your tool for distant reading, using a small sample set as a preliminary test if your dataset is large.

BUT YOU AREN'T DONE YET: IT'S TIME FOR DUE DILIGENCE

seven

Run a gut check. Compare your results with your source text, and reexamine your dataset for errors. Be willing to retry with a different tool if your results are unsatisfactory.

nine

Incorporate your results as seamlessly as possible within a longer, unified interpretation, enfolding both close-reading and distant-reading techniques.

six

Save your results and deliverables (visualizations, statistics, charts, datasets), along with metadata, in a durable, functionally interoperable format.

eight

Preface your written argument or visual representation of results with a summary of your tool usage. Tailor its length, diction, and specificity to your audience. Be honest about any gaps or flaws in your data.

ten

Supplement your statistics or figures by incorporating data from other digital tools, other interpretive strategies, and existing criticism on the text under inquiry.

FOR BEST RESULTS, GO DIGITAL + ANALOG

*Tools, charts, and statistics cannot
evaluate their own results.*

Digital outputs should be seen
as **means rather than ends**, as
points of entry to the text, as
provocations for rereading.

**Automation lends the critic an
unprecedented scope and speed
but lacks, at present, the
sophistication of close reading.**

*It is still necessary to interact closely with a
text to develop a fuller interpretation of theme.*

Know what drives your tool, what
kinds of data it tracks and what
kind it produces, so you can
manage your expectations about
what it can and cannot offer you.

Combine the affordances of the analog and the digital!



We can ask
bigger questions
with less time.
