

# Doing Literary Criticism

**Helping Students Engage  
with Challenging Texts**

**Essays on Literary Criticism for Students to Read**

**Bonus Resources for Teachers**

**Additional Chapter on Postmodern Literary Criticism**

## What You Have in This CD

This CD includes a wealth of extra features to support you in doing literary criticism with your students. Each chapter includes classroom-ready essays for students to read, and many of the chapters have extra resources for teachers. There is also a complete additional chapter on postmodern criticism. Roam around a bit. I hope you will find some useful materials for your classroom!

### Essays on Literary Criticism for Students to Read

The essays aimed at students are linked to the different critical approaches addressed in this book. (They are basically streamlined versions of the information you read in each chapter, offering the same sort of overview, brief history, and benefits and limitations of each approach.) Though they are challenging, these essays have been extensively tested in classrooms with students.

For each critical theory, two student essays are offered: a short version and a long version. The short versions generally run two pages, so they can be duplicated front-and-back on a single sheet of paper. The long versions generally run from four to six pages. I have always printed these long versions front-and-back, too, so the packets I handed out to students were never forbiddingly longer than three sheets with text on both sides.

If you decide to try out the essays with your students, you'll have to choose whether to use the long or short versions. The short versions offer a quick overview of each critical lens for students, and the long versions provide a more in-depth explanation. I mostly used the long versions with advanced or particularly motivated classes of seniors. The short versions I used with all my classes.

You have permission to print out, duplicate, and use either the long or short essays with students in your classroom only, as long as you duplicate them as is, including giving proper credit to the author and to Stenhouse Publishers on every copy.

### Bonus Resources for Teachers

The bonus resources for teachers supplement and extend the studies of different critical approaches outlined in *Doing Literary Criticism*.

For example, to go along with Chapter 7, "Genre Criticism," I have added a section on the modern genre of magic realism. To supplement Chapter 10, "Feminist

Criticism,” the CD includes a history of women writers for the last 2,000 years. To add dimension to Chapter 11, “Political Criticism,” the CD has an extended description of many varieties of advocacy criticism. Additional resources for Chapter 12, “Formalist Criticism,” include a brief overview of close reading and a lengthy list of literary terms for students.

## **Additional Chapter on Postmodern Literary Criticism**

Finally, this CD also offers an extra chapter on the most complicated of critical lenses, postmodern literary theory. The book in your hands simply could not be made long enough to accommodate this lengthy chapter on the complex ideas of modernism, postmodernism, and deconstruction. As with the other literary lenses in this book, an extensive discussion of the history, benefits, and limitations of postmodern criticism is offered, along with teaching suggestions and considerations and plenty of resource ideas.

The bonus chapter also includes one student essay—a long version—to accompany its focus on “po-mo lit crit.” Try as I might, I just could not manage to squeeze all those ideas into a short version for students. So, if you decide to give postmodern criticism a try, you’ve got to go big!

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# An Introduction to Literary Criticism for Students

By Tim Gillespie

*The only critical method is to be intelligent.*

—T. S. Eliot

*A dozen critics can extract a dozen meanings from the same text. Which is right? All of them and none. The name of the critical game is not certainty, it's having fun.*

—Margot Peters

## What Is Literary Criticism?

Sometimes the word *criticism* puts people off, because in everyday use it has negative connotations. We usually think of a “critic” as the kind of grumpy person who seems to exist solely to find problems and stress faults.

The word means more than that, however. It comes from the Greek verb *kritikos*, which means to judge or to decide. In its original sense, a critic is simply a person who expresses an informed judgment or opinion about the meaning, value, truth, beauty, or artistry of something.

In everyday culture, we are surrounded by criticism of this sort. A popular TV show has two film critics sitting side by side in a theater evaluating the week’s new movies. In local daily newspapers, we can find critical reviews of local music concerts, dance performances, and stage plays. In car magazines, we can find commentaries on new auto models. We can watch sports fans argue on the cable sports channels about the performances of our favorite football, basketball, baseball, or soccer teams. And though at times all these critics will make harsh judgments, they’re also just as likely to praise and celebrate high-quality work in any of these human endeavors. When we talk about criticism in this sense, we’re not talking only about finding fault. We’re talking about *critical thinking* in relation to different cultural activities.

Let’s get more specific. *Literary criticism* is the discipline of *interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating* works of literature. *Literature* is most commonly defined as works of writing that have lasted over the years because they deal with ideas of timeless and universal interest with exceptional artistry and power. This can include poems, stories, novels, plays, essays, memoirs, and so on.

Each of the three main activities of literary criticism—interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating—gives rise to different questions.

*The Interpretive Question:* What does this work of literature mean? When we *interpret* a work, we set forth one or more of its possible meanings. Reading is like a potluck picnic to which the writer brings the words and the readers bring the meanings. Literary works speak to us all in different ways, and one of the pleasures of talking about books is the chance to check out all the different ideas other readers bring to the picnic.

*The Analytic Question:* How does this piece of literature work? When we *analyze* a text, we get under the hood to see how the engine operates. Analysis is technical: pulling things apart, examining relationships, figuring out effects. We are not asking *what* a poem means anymore but *how* the author makes it click.

*The Evaluative Question:* Is this work of literature any good? When we *evaluate* a work, we form a personal judgment about its worth: Is this a great novel or a rotten one? Why? Does this poem have any value? Why? What does this work of literature add—or subtract—from the world?

Because readers in any classroom have widely different perspectives and preferences, our opinions about all these matters will differ widely. That's a good thing. Literary criticism does not require that we all agree about what a work of literature means, how it works, or whether it's effective. We don't even have to agree with any expert's judgment or even the teacher's opinions. We have only two obligations when we assert our opinions:

First, we are obligated to *explain* as clearly as possible the reasons behind our ideas and back them up with evidence from the actual text we're discussing.

Second, we are obligated to *listen* respectfully to classmates' ideas in the hope that we can learn from hearing how others respond to works of literature.

## Does Literary Criticism Have Any Practical Use?

Literary criticism is valuable for a number of reasons.

First, literary criticism improves your general reading skills, giving you more tools to help solve problems of understanding as you read.

Second, literary criticism can help you in college by giving you more ways to respond to what you read. (Here's a typical assignment given by an actual instructor in a college Freshman English class: "Identify, trace, and explain a theme or idea that occurs in more than one of the novels we have read. Do not simply repeat themes your instructor has been discussing in class; formulate an original approach.") When you are asked in this way to stop restating knowledge you've been taught and to start creating your own knowledge, literary criticism can help.

Third, literary criticism supports the development of critical thinking skills. It gives you a sense of confidence about developing your own critical standards and judgments

and not having to surrender your opinion to others' interpretations. It sharpens your general interpretive, analytic, and evaluative skills. And it improves your ability to make a good argument by encouraging the habit of backing up your opinions with reasons and textual evidence.

For all these reasons, literary criticism can help you develop your skills as an independent thinker and reader.

## What's a Literary Theory?

In literary criticism, a *theory* is the specific method, approach, or viewpoint a critic or reader has staked out from which he or she interprets, analyzes, and evaluates works of literature—and often the world.

There are numerous literary theories. Some you may find useful, some not so useful. That's for you to judge. But you should learn how each theory or approach works before you make your final judgment.

Here are the essential questions when looking at literary theories:

What are some of the many different ways a reader can approach a book? How does each work? What are the benefits and limitations of each? Which critical theories make sense and seem useful to you? Which don't? Why?

Some of the literary theories or approaches we may be studying this year include: Reader Response, Biographical, Historical, Psychological, Myth or Archetypal, Genre, Moral, Philosophical, Feminist, Political or Advocacy or Social Justice, Postmodernism, and Formalist or New Criticism.



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In everyday culture, we are surrounded by criticism of this sort. A popular TV show has two film critics sitting side by side in a theater evaluating the week’s new movies. In local daily newspapers, we can find critical reviews of local music concerts, dance performances, and stage plays. In car magazines, we can find commentaries on new auto models and in gamer magazines on the latest video games. We can watch sports geeks argue for hours every day on the cable sports channels about the performances of our favorite football, basketball, baseball, or soccer teams. And though at times all these critics will make harsh judgments, they’re also just as likely to praise and celebrate high-quality work in any of these human endeavors. So really, when we talk about criticism in this sense, we’re not talking only about finding fault. We’re talking about *critical thinking* in relation to different cultural activities.

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Anyone doing literary criticism is generally engaged in one of these three core activities in some combination: *interpreting*, *analyzing*, and *evaluating*.

Because readers in any classroom have widely different perspectives and preferences, our opinions about all these matters will differ widely. That's a good thing. Literary criticism does not require that we all agree about what a work of literature means, how it works, or whether it's effective. We don't even have to agree with any expert's judgment or even the teacher's opinions. We have only two obligations when we assert our opinions:

First, we are obligated to *explain* as clearly as possible the reasons behind our ideas and back them up with evidence from the actual text we're discussing.

Second, we are obligated to *listen* respectfully to other people's ideas in the hope that we can learn from hearing how others interpret, analyze, and evaluate works of literature.

## Does Literary Criticism Have Any Practical Use?

The discipline of literary criticism is valuable for a number of reasons, including the following:

First, literary criticism improves your general reading skills, giving you more tools to help solve problems of understanding as you read.

Second, literary criticism can help you in college by expanding your awareness of different approaches, thus giving you more ways to respond to what you read. (Here's a typical assignment given by an actual instructor in a college Freshman English class: "Identify, trace, and explain a theme or idea that occurs in more than one of the novels we have read. Do not simply repeat themes your instructor has been discussing in class; formulate an original approach. Make your claim and support it with evidence—passages

and page numbers. Make it clear why this theme or idea is of relevance today.”) When you are asked in this way to stop restating knowledge you’ve been taught and to start creating your own knowledge, literary criticism can help by giving you different angles of approach on the texts you read.

Third, literary criticism supports the development of critical thinking skills. It encourages you to identify your own reading habits and to explore beyond their boundaries. It can also give you a sense of confidence and responsibility about developing your own critical standards and judgments and not having to surrender your opinion to others’ interpretations. It sharpens your general interpretive, analytic, and evaluative skills. And it improves your ability to make a good argument by encouraging the habit of backing up your opinions with reasons and textual evidence.

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Here are the essential questions when looking at literary theories:

What are some of the many different ways a reader can approach a book? How does each work? What are the benefits and limitations of each literary lens? Which critical theories make sense and seem useful to you? Which don’t? Why?

Some of the literary theories or approaches we may be studying this year include:

- Reader Response Criticism
- Biographical Criticism
- Historical Criticism
- Psychological Criticism
- Myth or Archetypal Criticism
- Genre Criticism
- Moral Criticism
- Philosophical Criticism
- Feminist Criticism
- Political or Advocacy or Social Justice Criticism
- Postmodern Criticisms
- Formalist or New Criticism

## A Ten-Minute History of “Lit Crit”

Squatting on the banks of the Euphrates River in lower Mesopotamia 5,000 years ago, a Sumerian scribe scooped up a lump of wet clay and slapped it together between his hands to make a palm-sized pad. Then he began to wedge a series of symbols onto the thick clay with a small reed sharpened at one end. Later he could bake his tablet in the sun to create a durable, easily portable, and recyclable record of his thoughts. If he wanted a more permanent record, he could bake the tablet in an oven. This form of inscription (now called *cuneiform*, which is Latin for “wedge-shaped” because of the marks of the writing instrument) is the world’s first written language of which we are aware.

Developed by the Sumerian people who thrived around 3000 BCE along the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys in what is now Iraq, this system of writing was adopted and slowly evolved as it was used by subsequent cultures who peopled the area—Assyrians, Akkadians, Babylonians—for the next nearly 3,000 years. Archaeologists have found and deciphered thousands of examples of this ancient script. Most of the earliest tablets detail commerce such as records of business purchases and sales, or lists of merchandise. Over time, other content began to appear, including royal inscriptions commissioned by kings to commemorate their deeds, historical accounts, and laws. Soon enough came representations on those little clay pads of the timeless social arts of the human voice: hymns to gods and goddesses, poems, riddles, and stories—in other words, *literature*.

And nearly as long as humans have been writing literature, we have also been *criticizing* it. Apparently, we’ve always loved both telling stories and then later talking about them and interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating them. By the time the ancient Greek scholar Aristotle came along, many generations later, the study of literature (its values, qualities, and effects) was considered a pillar of an educated person’s curriculum. As Aristotle walked with his students (his favored way of teaching) along the long colonnades of his school, the Lyceum in Athens, he engaged in literary criticism with them.

For much of history, however, literary criticism has not just been stuck in the walkways of academic institutions. The act of literary criticism has usually gone hand in hand with the act of writing. Many writers have regarded it an important part of their work to set standards, discuss qualities of their art, review other writers, and comment on the world of literature. In *Hamlet*, for example, Shakespeare shared some of his strong theories about the purposes and standards for stage plays. In his *Biographia Literaria* of 1817, for another example, the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote a sharp rebuke of Aristotle’s ideas; reading Coleridge’s words, we can witness one writer arguing about the standards of his art form with another writer who lived 2,000 years before. In our own time, we can read every week in local newspapers and national book reviews criticism of new books by working writers. By such means, *authors* have traditionally been our leading critical literary *authorities*, as you can see in the very relationship between the two words.

In the past century, however, literary criticism has become more specialized as a formal academic discipline in colleges and universities. These days many academic

critics do not produce creative art themselves; they produce only criticism. They are not novelists, poets, or playwrights, just literary critics. The field of literary criticism has thus become more specialized, perhaps more objective, and in many cases more remote from the act of creating literature than in the past. This can cause problems.

## **Why Does Literary Criticism Sometimes Get a Bum Rap Today?**

The field of literary criticism these days has tensions. For some readers, the sheer enjoyment of reading books and the pleasures of personal response to books can be ruined by literary criticism. We don't like people who don't like what we do, of course, or who make us feel that the books we love are somehow inferior. And we aren't fond of those who seek to bully us into believing that what we got out of a favorite novel or poem was somehow "wrong" and that they know what it "really means." Or we may feel some literary theories are so obscure they leave us scratching our heads in bewilderment. We have some stereotypes about these kinds of literary critics, including the cartoon image of the teacher who so overanalyzes a work (or sees Freudian meanings, Jungian archetypes, mythic cycles, or sexism in *everything*, or forces students to find motifs and symbols endlessly) that our pleasure in reading is snuffed out.

We can find some of this attitude in American scholar and novelist Susan Sontag's famous 1964 essay "Against Interpretation." Sontag rails against the kind of literary criticism that attempts to slot creative art into narrow categories, make daring art manageable and comfortable, or interpret art by theories. She derides the "armies of interpreters" who try to squeeze complex stories into pre-made critical boxes. All these strategies diminish the rich experience of literature, Sontag says. We should read to experience in our bones the adventure of a novel, to feel at our core the power of a poem, to thrill at the radical new ideas posed in a bracing piece of nonfiction. All these experiences can be diminished by the activities of endlessly interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating.

Some of those most concerned with this danger have been, no surprise, writers themselves, trying to reclaim their art from critics and align themselves with ordinary readers. For example, Dr. Samuel Johnson, the great English essayist and dictionary-maker, says in his *Life of Gray*, "I rejoice to concur with the *common reader*; for by the *common sense* of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices after . . . the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours" (Woolf 1925, 1). And who can forget Mark Twain's famously witty "Notice" at the start of *Huck Finn*? "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. By Order of the Author" (Twain 1884, vii).

These comments express the writers' wish that readers simply *experience* and *enjoy* their work rather than apply some critical theory to it, wary of the way literary criticism can intrude on one's personal response.

So, what are we to do? How can we preserve our love of reading, our most heartfelt and personal response to books, and still learn something about the endeavor of literary criticism? Is it possible to *do* literary criticism in an English class and not deaden the whole endeavor of enjoying a good novel, story, play, or poem?

## A Way Out Using a Slightly Stale Sports Analogy

You know the answer to the previous question: Of course.

Literary criticism and love of literature don't have to be mutually exclusive. We can be both enthusiastic, excited readers and intellectually rigorous literary critics simultaneously.

Here's a sports analogy I will offer. (I used to play and love football almost as much as I love books and writing, but not quite.)

You can go to a football game (or a soccer or basketball game, an art show, a ballet, a movie, or a piano concert, but for now we'll stick with football) and have a great experience, even if you know very little in a technical way about the sport. You're excited when your football team is driving down the field because of a series of great plays or when it scores, and you're disappointed when the other team scores. You yell, clap, and boo, enjoying the action on the field as well as the music, cheerleaders, band, fight song, crowd, your friends, the colors, fall weather, the whole spectacle. It's a rich experience.

Meanwhile, the person sitting next to you may be equally engaged in the football game but may be more of a scholar or critic of it than you are. This person may have played the game, maybe watches football on TV regularly, reads about it, follows the sport religiously, and enjoys knowing all the small technical details of this ridiculously complex game. This spectator may not only enjoy the same sensory impressions you do but perhaps also watches for line play, downfield blocking, fakes and options, unfolding patterns, and shifting defenses. This person might be able to predict upcoming plays based on tendencies of the team in certain situations or based on the formation that emerges from the huddle, may know the quarterback likes to roll to his left and throw back across the field, may know that a certain defensive set signals a blitz, or may know that the opposing noseguard signals his rushes by the way he places his feet. Or this spectator might have a very specific point of view—a theory—about the game, such as the wishbone is the best offense. Or you have to establish a running game. Or special teams win games. Whatever. This person might analyze and judge the play of both teams based on his or her theories. Overall, it looks like this spectator is an expert gridiron critic who has more knowledge of the sport than the average football fan.

Now, does this expert spectator sitting next to you enjoy the game less than you do? No, of course not. It's a silly question. Both of you can enjoy the primary appeal of the

game, which is the experience. Having more technical knowledge or having a theory about football doesn't have to take away any of the pleasure of seeing the game, of hearing the crash of shoulder pads, of smelling the hot dogs and wet grass, of cheering a great pass or run or of high-fiving your friends at an interception by your team. Criticizing or interpreting the game doesn't necessarily mean it can't be enjoyed. In fact, having extra knowledge shouldn't take anything away from the experience of the game at all; rather, it should deepen the pleasure, right?

The only point at which expert spectators might have a diminished experience is if they lose perspective, such as perhaps getting so involved in keeping statistics that they stop simply experiencing the game. So, all we have to do is not lose perspective. We just have to remind ourselves to enjoy the game. We must always affirm our primary response to a work of literature—the joy in reading, in being absorbed by a good book—that comes to us from our emotions, senses, sympathies, and imaginations. Take Margot Peters's advice: "The name of the critical game is not certainty, it's having fun" (1995, 26).

Robert Frost once said, "A poem should begin in delight and end in wisdom" (1949, vi). That's also a teacher's hope for a classroom study of literary criticism together. We want to start with a delight in reading, the same motive that had us sneaking books under the covers to read by flashlight after our bedtimes when we were younger. If on top of that, we can gain a bit of wisdom and sharpen our critical abilities, so much the better. If we keep our perspective, we can learn to better interpret, analyze, evaluate, and still enjoy. So here's to wisdom and delight.

Onward! Go, team, go!

# Reader Response Criticism for Students: Beginning with Personal Meaning and Social Context

By Tim Gillespie

*It takes a great reader to make a great book.*  
—Natalia Garibian

*Reader response criticism* is not a method so much as an attitude about reading. It claims that the meaning of any literary work is not just what the author put into the text. Rather, a *transaction* occurs between author and reader, and individual readers *construct* meaning as they interact with the text.

Each reader brings to each act of reading a unique background and set of preferences. Given such differences, individuals have different interpretations of texts. In essence, then, a story or poem is essentially brand new each time it is read by a new reader, and readers *create* its meaning as much as they *discover* its meaning. Thus, there isn't a universally "correct" interpretation or single meaning of any work of literature—just the vital different personal experiences that individual readers have. The joy of reading literature is for each of us to seek ideas of importance to us, to find characters whose hopes and problems we can relate to, to experience dilemmas we may face—to make a personal connection, in other words. When we read literature, we are actually reading ourselves.

Does this mean that whatever we think a text means is absolute, that we can't be wrong in any interpretation? Not necessarily. Reader response criticism does not imply that a text can mean anything we want it to mean. We all make errors or misjudgments about what we read. But there is a simple standard of "correctness" in reader response. All we have to do is back up our interpretations with specific evidence from the text. If we say a book is boring, we're responsible for finding a specific boring passage that we can share with classmates and tell why we think it's tedious. If we say the descriptions in a work are too long, we have to be able to cite a specific page number that shows one of those wordy descriptions and tell what we think the author should have done to cut it down. If we love an author's metaphors, we need to be able to point to a few of them and tell why we think they're effective. We are free to interpret texts our own way, but we need to justify our interpretations with evidence.

For reader response critics, then, is this the last word in finding meaning—having a personal reaction backed up with textual evidence? Not quite.

Individual responses to a work of literature are what *begin* a discussion, not what *finish* it. As Lonnie Kliever puts it, "A wise person makes up his mind *for* himself,



but only a fool makes up his mind *by himself*" (1998). We need to take our ideas to the next level by comparing them to the ideas of others. Lively class discussions, where we bounce ideas off one another, help us think beyond our individual perspectives. As we share and listen, we open ourselves to the possibility that we might change our minds, moving beyond our initial personal interpretations to more complex and reasoned responses. With luck, we will gain new insights and a deeper understanding of the text. The goal is for everyone in the classroom to grow as a reader and thinker by learning from others' perceptions. Reader response celebrates both the power of personal response and the mosaic of responses that can be created in a supportive classroom community.

But doesn't a writer usually want readers to get some particular meaning or message out of a story or poem, and isn't it thus a violation of the writer's vision if we get other meanings or interpretations from the work? Isn't our main job as readers to figure out what the author intended for us to figure out rather than to construct our own meanings? Nope, say reader response proponents.

Most reader response advocates call the attempt to figure out the author's intentions the "intentional fallacy." It's a fallacy—an error in thinking—they argue, because readers can't ever really know what those intentions were. How can we know exactly what William Shakespeare wanted us to get from his plays? We can't, because he has been dead for 400 years, and he left no statements about his goals. Even authors who have talked about the meaning of their writings aren't completely trustworthy. The novelist D. H. Lawrence noted that writers may have intellectual explanations for their fictions, but great stories often have at their heart subconscious themes and layers of meaning of which even the author isn't aware. Thus, Lawrence said, "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale" (1923, 31).

Writers themselves often realize that a work of literary art can mean more than its creator intended it to mean or can have multiple meanings in the hands of multiple readers. In her poem "The Secret," for example, Denise Levertov expresses delight about readers who find something in her writing that she hadn't consciously intended: "Two girls discover/the secret of life/in a sudden line of/poetry./I who don't know the/secret wrote/the line . . ."

For these reasons, reader response critics don't care much about authors' intentions. Most great literary works are open to multiple interpretations, and the author's ideas are not the only option.

To sum up, in a classroom using a reader response approach, students are free to use their own interpretations for understanding a work of literature without having to give way to any "official" point of view from textbook, teacher, or other authority. However, students have to articulate and support their responses to classmates and open-mindedly listen to others' opinions.

# Reader Response Criticism for Students: Beginning with Personal Meaning and Social Context

By Tim Gillespie

*When you read a classic, you do not see in the book more than you did before. You see more in you than there was before.*

—Clifton Fadiman

*It takes a great reader to make a great book.*

—Natalia Garibian

## An Overview and Benefits

*Reader response criticism*—sometimes called *audience theory*—is not a specific viewpoint or method from which to approach works of literature like most of the other literary lenses we’ll be studying. It’s more of an *attitude*.

Simply put, reader response criticism puts the individual reader into the driver’s seat. It asserts that the meaning of any literary work is not just what was created by the author—or what has been decided on by experts or teachers—but what is constructed by the individual reader interacting with the work.

The meaning of a literary work, in other words, is not embedded in the text but in the process a reader or viewer undergoes while engrossed in its words.

Each reader brings to every act of reading a unique background and set of attitudes, preferences, biases, and values. Given these differences, every individual will take a different interpretation and personal meaning from any text. In essence then, a text is essentially brand new each time it is read by a new reader, and readers *create* its meaning as much as they *discover* its meaning. Thus, there isn’t a universally “proper” interpretation or single “correct” meaning of any work of literature—just the vital personal experience that individual readers have when they read something, regardless of what teachers or experts over the centuries have said about the work. The joy of reading literature is for each of us to seek ideas of importance to us, to find characters whose hopes and problems we can relate to, and to experience dilemmas we may be experiencing—to make a personal connection, in other words. Thus, when we read literature, we are actually reading ourselves.

Is each reader's individual interpretation the last word about a text? No. After we have each made personal meaning from a text, our individual perspectives need to be weighed against the experiences and ideas of others. As Lonnie Kliever, a professor at Southern Methodist University, puts it, "A wise person makes up his mind *for* himself, but only a fool makes up his mind *by* himself. When you isolate yourself from the community of discourse, then you are at the mercy of your own ignorance, your own superstition, and your own bias" (1998).

Thus, for reader response advocates, the encounter with literature does not end with students' initial individual responses; those personal responses are what *begin* the discussion, not *finish* it. Lively class conversations help us think beyond our singular perspectives. As we share feelings and interpretations in a community of fellow learners, we get to hear the responses of others, which might cause us to modify and deepen our own responses—particularly if the goal is not necessarily to agree or to find a single "best" or "correct" interpretation of a work of literature. Rather, the goal is for all to grow as readers and humans by learning from the perceptions and concerns of other readers whose experiences, personalities, and opinions are different from ours. We all know how exciting a good conversation about a book or film can be, especially when we get new insights that stretch us beyond our original perceptions. In this light, reader response is quite democratic, striving for a learning situation in which readers exchange views and stimulate one another toward more complex understandings. Reader response celebrates both the power of personal response and the mosaic of responses that can be created in a supportive community.

In a classroom using a reader response approach, students are free to use their own interpretations for understanding a work of literature without having to give way to any "official" point of view from textbook, teacher, or other authority. However, students also have to submit to the discipline of articulating their responses clearly to classmates and open-mindedly listening to others' sometimes quite-different opinions. At its best, this double dose of freedom coupled with responsibility replicates what we want from citizens of a democracy—the ability both to think independently and to work successfully in a community of other independent thinkers.

## Limitations and Critiques of Reader Response

Reader response has plenty of critics. One claim is that it waters down standards. If all meanings exist within the individual reader, then it seems to follow that we can assert no one's insight as being any more perceptive than another's, or propose the notion that there might be consistent, universal standards for judging literature. Is the gold standard of literary value simply, "I like this novel, therefore it's good," or, "I don't like this novel, therefore it stinks"? If all of us readers are simply imposing our own personal themes or

judgments on texts, recreating all readings in our own images, aren't we just staring in a mirror and not learning anything?

Moreover, one of the pleasures of reading (fiction, particularly) is the chance to learn about other humans in different circumstances than ours. The protagonist of a great novel may be of a different gender, race, social class, age, or nationality than we are, and from a place we've never been and a period we've never experienced. By the power of the human imagination—of both writer and reader—the story can plunge us directly into that other world and consciousness, enlarging our capacity to understand other humans quite unlike us. We can suffer the narrow cultural restrictions on Jane Eyre, travel the Mississippi River with Huck Finn, sit at King Arthur's round table, or see the narrow world of a Southern small town through Scout Finch's eyes. But we can't learn much if our attitude is, "I can't relate to this book because the character in it isn't anything like me. I'm not female in early nineteenth-century England, or a twelve-year-old barefoot ragamuffin in pre-Civil War Missouri, or a medieval knight trying to live up to a chivalric warrior code, or a little girl in a Depression-era Alabama town, so I can't get anything out of this book."

Part of the pleasure and benefit of reading fiction is the chance to escape ourselves and inhabit another human consciousness. Isn't this a healthy exercise of empathy and identification that will make us more understanding and tolerant of others' differences as well as our common humanity? In other words, isn't reader response a bit *egocentric*?

## **An Issue to Consider: Author's Intentions and "Reading In"**

Because reader response criticism starts with a reader's personal reaction to a work of literature rather than a teacher's ideas, an expert's interpretation, a preexisting critical theory, or a claim that there is a correct or even best interpretation of a text, it leads to a couple of interesting issues.

The first is the author's intent. Doesn't a writer usually want readers to get some particular meaning or message out of a story or a poem, and isn't it thus a violation of the writer's vision if we get other meanings or interpretations from the work? Isn't our main job as readers to figure out what the author intended for us to figure out? And doesn't this really solve all the dithering about what a particular poem or story really means? "It means just what the author wanted it to mean," a student once said.

Some scholars call this attitude the "intentional fallacy." It's a fallacy—an error in thinking—they argue, because readers can't ever really know what those intentions were, and sometimes writers can't, either!

We cannot reconstruct the intent of most past authors because of the obstacle of time. For example, we have no statements from William Shakespeare about what he was up to when he wrote any of his plays or poems. His intentions are all guesswork.

What about writers who have been direct and explicit about their intentions, who have made statements that have not been lost over time about what they were trying to do when they penned a work? Can't we at least trust that some writers will have offered up clear testimony that can be a helpful guide to interpretation? Sure, reader response critics say, we might derive some understandings about a work that we might otherwise have missed from a writer's testimony, but we should also be careful about consulting writer's own words about their aims. The stated intent of a work's creator shouldn't be the definitive interpretation, for at least a couple of reasons.

For one, some writers have been known to be purposely deceptive about their works. Tim O'Brien, for example, in his novels and in his public pronouncements frequently alters what he says about how much of his fiction about Vietnam is "true" to his own experience as a soldier in Vietnam and how much is not. Since one of O'Brien's main themes is the untrustworthiness of war stories, we can understand his reasons for blurring his intentions. Such tricksterism is not uncommon among writers.

Another reason not to rely exclusively on authors' statements is that, as we all know, there can be a huge gap between intentions and performance. What authors aim at may not be what they hit. They may have changed their minds as they wrote, or the work may have taken them a different direction they didn't originally foresee.

Maybe the most significant reason that we should be careful about trusting writers' accounts about their own work is psychological. Literature is an enactment of writers' deepest concerns; subconscious themes and layers of meaning may be present in a work that a writer isn't even aware of adding because humans, as we know, aren't always conscious of their own motives. Authors reveal and mask themselves in their works in complex psychological ways, so their statements about their intentions might be unaware or self-deceiving. The novelist and poet D. H. Lawrence asserted that writers often intellectualize about the surface matters in a work of art, yet the heart of every great story is all from the "dark under-conscious"—of which the writer cannot be aware. Therefore, Lawrence said famously, "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale" (1923, 31).

Perhaps the most famous statement by an American writer about his intentions is Edgar Allan Poe's long essay "The Philosophy of Composition," an account of the creation of "The Raven" a year after that great poem was first published. Poe says that his aim is to show exactly how he wrote "The Raven" in a manner that had nothing to do with "accident or intuition" but that "proceeded step by step to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" (1846). For many pages, Poe talks about how he systematically sought the perfect length, sound, structure, and topic for his poem. This all sounds rational and calculated, yet Poe never mentions once that his young wife Virginia was dying of tuberculosis when he wrote "The Raven." Though there's no doubt that the power of the poem relies in large part on the formal elements that Poe so carefully laid out—it is, in fact, a highly structured, carefully designed poem—part of its power and emotional creepiness also certainly stem from its deeply felt sense of personal loss, but he never acknowledges that.

Poe was even known to have told different stories to different people about the creation of “The Raven.” He told one person he’d written the poem in a passion over a couple of days and another that it had lain on his desk for ten years. Set against Poe’s claims in the essay about the rigidly logical process of creation, this account has even made some scholars suspect that his essay is a satire or joke. If we cannot then completely trust this highly detailed recounting by a poet about his own motives and process, can we trust any author talking about his or her own work?

Better than anyone else, perhaps, writers themselves realize that a work of literary art can mean more than its creator intended it to mean and can have multiple lives in the hands of multiple readers. I recall reading that William Faulkner laughingly said that he didn’t put any symbols consciously into his novella *The Bear* but welcomed readers to add any. And in her poem “The Secret,” Denise Levertov expresses a delight in those who find something in her writing that she hadn’t consciously intended:

Two girls discover  
the secret of life  
in a sudden line of  
poetry.  
I who don’t know the  
secret wrote  
the line . . .

All these reasons justify cautiousness about relying too much on what authors themselves say about their literary works.

A balanced approach to this issue would be to respect an author’s aims to the extent they can be accurately known. Authors’ accounts can add insights to our reading. At the same time, we should also recognize that an author does not have a monopoly on knowing what a work means. What the writer intended is not the only possible meaning of a work; we can get other things out of it, too. Most good literature offers multiple meanings.

One traditional name for the act of finding meanings that the author didn’t intend is *reading in*, and some people are impatient with doing this. But reader response critics have no problem with it. Their attitude is that we should feel free to let our interpretations go in a different direction than whatever the author’s intentions may have been.

## **Another Issue to Consider: Misreading**

A second problem in reader response is errors. If this approach celebrates each individual’s personal response, can there ever be *errors* in reading—absolutely dead-wrong misreadings or misunderstandings of a work? Of course. Reader response does not imply that *anything* goes as far as interpretation. People do make errors when they

read. We all are inattentive, biased, or blind as readers at times and will thus miss details or let our interpretations be based on ideas not justified by the text. In the face of this, readers must simply be ready to defend their interpretations based on evidence they can cite from a work.

### **Some Typical Reader Response–Type Questions**

1. Did you enjoy reading the work? Identify specifically reasons why or why not.
2. Track your initial response after reading the first few paragraphs or pages. Then describe how your reactions changed by the time you were midway through the work, then after finishing. Were your first impressions realized or altered?
3. Describe any problems this work posed for you. What seemed strange, confusing, misleading, objectionable? Why? How did you deal with these problems?
4. Did the literary work offer any new insight or point of view to you? If so, did it lead you to a change in your own thinking? If not, did it confirm thoughts or opinions you already held? Explain.
5. Does the work, in whatever way, connect to anything from your own life? Can you relate to any of the incidents, ideas, feelings, or actions in this work in terms of your own experiences or emotions? Relate any memories from your life that the work evoked.
6. Was there a particular character with whom you identified in this novel? Explain how. What did you learn from this empathetic connection? Any characters you disliked? Why? Any characters remind you of anyone you know? Explain. What qualities of which characters strike you as good characteristics to develop in yourself?
7. Describe your favorite line/paragraph/part of this work, and why.
8. Discuss any recurring themes, ideas, images, or symbols you encountered in your reading and your response to them.
9. What is the message in this work? Is there a point of view or author's philosophy expressed? What is it? What's your response to this opinion?
10. If you were an English teacher, would you want to share this work with your students? Would you want this work to have influence on future generations of young readers, maybe even your own children? Why or why not?
11. What did you learn about yourself as a reader during the reading of this book? In what ways were your literary or critical skills expanded by this work?

This is the reader response standard of “correctness”: Can you back up your interpretations with specific examples of textual evidence? If you say a book is boring, can you find a particularly boring passage, share it with your classmates, and describe what makes it tedious for you? If you say the descriptions are too long, can you let everyone know the specific page number of one of the descriptions you thought was too wordy and talk about what the author should have done to cut it down? If you say a character is shallow, can you cite the page number that shows that character in action and why you think the character’s behavior on that page lacks believable depth? If you are an advocate of reader response criticism, answering those kinds of questions is your responsibility.

## To Sum Up

So what does a reader response classroom look like? We surround literary works with talk, bouncing ideas off one another until thoughts are caroming around the classroom. The teacher lets the discussion go where it will, whether it be to associations with other works of literature, references to personal experience, reactions to the human issues and moral dilemmas of the characters, responses to the writer’s craft, or something else. No one is looking for a single interpretation on which we can all agree. Instead, we seek together to comprehend, enjoy, and use literature to help us better understand ourselves and the human condition as well as to understand the wonderfully rich ways writing can be employed.

As we share and listen, we open ourselves to the possibility that we might change our minds, moving beyond our initial understandings to deeper and more reasoned responses. We may well make connections between our readings and those of others. With luck, we will get new insights, astound others with our ideas, and learn and grow—as readers, writers, thinkers, and thoughtful humans.



# Biographical Criticism for Students: Examining the Relevance of a Writer's Life and Identity

By Tim Gillespie

*Every author in some way portrays himself in his works.*  
—J. W. von Goethe

*If people are really hungry, they do not care about the biography of the baker.*  
—Isaac Bashevis Singer

## An Overview and Benefits

*Biographical criticism* assumes that there is a relationship between a writer's life and work and that we can understand the literary work better as we understand its creator better. Knowing something about an author, we can seek connections between personal and artistic growth, even linking particular stories, plays, or poems to particular incidents, people, and historical occurrences in an author's life. That such links exist and are useful to our understanding of the works is the core assumption of biographical criticism.

The main strategy of a biographical critic is to do some digging into the facts of an author's life and times and to relate that information back to the author's work. This approach, therefore, requires going "off the page," which means not just reading the literary text but also doing research into the author's life.

Biographical information can greatly enrich our experience of reading. For example, we might well be moved by John Milton's poem "On His Deceased Wife," even without knowing much about the English poet's life. One line in the poem, "Her face was veiled," seems to fit Milton's description of his encounter with his recently-passed-away wife Katherine in a hazy dream. However, knowing that Milton was blind when he got married and that he never actually saw Katherine adds an extra dimension of meaning to the line and poem.

At its best, biographical criticism shows us the imaginative spirit as we see how writers have taken events from their own lives and, by their creativity, refashioned these experiences into their art. This offers us new ways to think about literature.

## Limitations and Critiques of Biographical Criticism

Many readers and writers think the only proper study of literature is the work itself and that authors should remain offstage. The less that is known about the writer, according to this point of view, the more attention can be directed to the literature on the page. After all, what really counts are the words, not the life facts of the personality who wrote them.

Writers themselves often make this point, getting irritated when they spend years creating their well-polished literary works and then realizing that readers may be distracted by the facts of their unpolished lives. Does a knowledge of Ken Kesey's experiments with psychedelic drugs in the 1960s overshadow his terrific novels such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Does J. D. Salinger's curious fifty-year life as a hermit interfere with our appreciation of *Catcher in the Rye*? Will we be able to read Ezra Pound's poetry objectively if we know that he moved to Italy and actively supported Benito Mussolini's fascism during World War II? Are we settling for gossip—or our judgments about a writer's personal limitations—instead of challenging ourselves with the writer's words?

Distraction of this sort is not the worst problem of biographical criticism in the eyes of critics who challenge its premises. Is it really the case, they ask, that readers cannot correctly or fully interpret a piece of literature unless they know about the personal and psychological circumstances surrounding its creation? Is biographical context truly the key to understanding the ultimate significance of a work of art?

“No” is the skeptics' answer. From this point of view, the power of the artist's imagination must transcend the merely autobiographical. Works of literary art are inventions, carefully crafted and shaped, not just acts of memory. Even when events or characters in a novel or play appear to coincide with incidents and people from a writer's life, there's still a kind of alchemy involved in which the writer takes experiences, revises them, invents new ones, and cuts and pastes in some rich and wonderful literary brew, mixing memory, imagination, experience, and desire to make an astonishing new story that may almost seem truer than any everyday sources in the author's life.

Who is to say, furthermore, that writers have to be limited to the experiences of their own lives? Think of all the artists who invent, seemingly from thin air, rich and plausible fictional worlds—from the realistic island of shipwrecked boys in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to the fantastical universes created by J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula LeGuin, or J. K. Rowling.

A final argument against biographical criticism might be that provided by one of the greatest all-time writers in the English language, an anonymous writer from the late fourteenth century about whom we know absolutely nothing. After being ignored or forgotten for more than 400 years, a single manuscript by this poet, whom scholars call the Pearl Poet, was discovered in the early 1800s in a dusty library. The manuscript included a grand tale in verse about King Arthur's court, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” By analyzing the language, scholars can deduce the general time period and region of England in which the poem was written and can make rough guesses about

the social status, position, and education of the poet, but we really don't know a single concrete thing about him—or her! Yet we can still read and endlessly enjoy the wonderful tale. In this case, biography seems utterly irrelevant to our reading.

## To Sum Up

Biographical approaches to literature indicate an age-old interest in what influence the personal facts of writers' lives and identities might have on the works they create and the way readers receive those works. Traditional biographical criticism offers students many questions for vigorous debate: What sorts of things should readers know about the author to deepen their understanding of the literary work? Does this biographical knowledge actually enrich our understanding of the work or detract from it—or is biographical information utterly irrelevant? What does the literary work say about its author?

Ultimately, each of us has to decide whether knowledge about the biography of a writer has any relevance to our appreciation, understanding, and judgment of the writer's work.

# Biographical Criticism for Students: Examining the Relevance of a Writer's Life and Identity

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*Every author in some way portrays himself in his works.*  
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## An Overview

One time-honored way to approach a work of literature is to consider it in the light of the author's life. *Biographical criticism* assumes that there is a relationship between a writer's life and work and that we can understand the literary work better as we understand its creator better.

The main strategy of a biographical critic is to do some digging into the facts of an author's life and times and to relate that information back to the author's work. This approach, therefore, requires going “off the page”—doing research, in other words. Biographical scholars seek connections between personal growth and artistic development, even linking particular stories, plays, or poems to particular incidents, people, and historical occurrences in an author's life. That such links exist and are useful to our understanding of the works is the core assumption of biographical criticism.

## Benefits of Biographical Criticism

Most literary anthologies include information on the backgrounds of writers, taking for granted that this knowledge will enable readers to encounter the writer's works with a deeper understanding of how they came to be and what they might mean. Many readers seem unquenchable in their hunger to know more about the artists behind the poems, stories, plays, and novels that they love; biographies of writers are immensely popular.

Biographical information can enrich our experience of reading. For example, we might be greatly moved by John Milton's poem "On His Deceased Wife" without knowing much about the English poet's life. One line, "Her face was veiled," seems to fit the idea of the poet seeing his recently expired wife in a hazy dream. However, knowing that Milton was blind when he got married and that he never actually did see his wife Katherine adds an extra dimension of meaning to the line and poem. So biographical investigation can offer new ways to think about pieces of literature.

At its best, then, biographical criticism shows us the imaginative spirit as we see how writers have taken events from their own lives—the only firsthand material any of us has to draw upon, after all—and by their creativity, refashioned these experiences into their art.

## Limitations and Critiques of Biographical Criticism

Many readers, critics, and writers think that the only proper study of literature is the work and that authors should remain offstage. The less that is known about the writer, according to this point of view, the more attention can be directed to the literature on the page. After all, what really counts are the words, not the life facts of the personality who wrote them.

We can understand the irritation of writers who spend their lives creating literary works they hope will be riveting to readers and then realize that those readers are more interested in the authors' lives. There is a danger when readers are distracted from authors' works by their biographies. Does knowledge of Ken Kesey's experiments with psychedelic drugs as a leader of the 1960s counterculture overshadow his terrific novels such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Does J. D. Salinger's curious fifty years as a hermit interfere with our appreciation of *Catcher in the Rye*? Are we settling for gossip about a writer instead of challenging ourselves with the writer's actual words?

Distraction of this sort is not the worst problem of biographical criticism in the eyes of writers and critics who challenge its premises. Is it really the case, they ask, that readers cannot correctly or fully interpret a piece of literature unless they know about the personal and psychological circumstances surrounding its creation? Is the biographical context truly the key to understanding the ultimate significance of a work of art?

"No" is the skeptics' answer. From this point of view, the power of the artist's imagination must transcend the merely autobiographical. Works of literary art are inventions, carefully crafted and shaped, not just acts of memory. In his 1978 novel *The World According to Garp*, John Irving's main character decides that imagination is always more important than memory for a writer. Even when events or characters in a novel or play appear to coincide with incidents and people from a writer's life, there's still a kind of imaginative alchemy involved in which the writer takes experiences, revises them,

invents new ones, and cuts and pastes in some rich and wonderful literary brew, mixing memory, imagination, experience, and desire to make an astonishing new story that may almost seem truer than any everyday sources in the author's life.

And who is to say that writers have to be limited to the experiences of their own lives? Think of all the artists who invent, seemingly from thin air, rich and plausible fictional worlds—from the island of shipwrecked boys in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to the fantastical universes created by J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula LeGuin, or J. K. Rowling.

In fact, actively avoiding the autobiographical is common counsel to aspiring young fiction writers. As Carol Bly puts it in *The Passionate, Accurate Story*, her book of advice for budding fiction writers, there is a danger when writers avoid leaping beyond the safety of self-knowledge. Clinging to the actualities of personal experience makes it harder for a writer to imagine the lives of other humans, Bly asserts, which is the animating impulse of fiction. She says that it is easier to tell the truth if we're not writing about ourselves, whom we censor and protect. We need to get ourselves out of our systems. And most great writers do, taking huge imaginative leaps to portray characters quite unlike them. As T. S. Eliot said, the best poetry is "not an expression of personality but an escape from personality" (1974, 33). Given this attitude, we can understand why some writers believe that biographical critics err when they equate a literary work's contents with an author's life.

Another assault on biographical criticism comes from postmodern critics such as the French thinker Roland Barthes. In his influential 1977 essay, "The Death of the Author," Barthes says the very idea of "the Author" is a modern concept. For much of human history, works of literary art—poems, songs, heroic stories, fairy tales—were shared by oral performers, who were often repeating works that had been around a long time and maybe altering them to their own style, in the folk tradition. The creation of literature was thus communal, and the audience was focused on the *performance* of the work, not its *authorship*. The minstrel singing a folk song or the storyteller relating an epic on a cold night around the fire were sharing common cultural treasures rather than the intellectual property of any one person. It was only with the growth in the late Middle Ages of the European ideas of individualism and capitalism, says Barthes, that the idea came about of an Author as an individual whose genius is responsible for a text, a single creator who "owns" the language of the work.

Barthes challenges this idea in terms similar to those of reader response proponents. A literary performance, he says, even when committed to the page by an author, still never really has a single meaning. Each time it is encountered by a new reader in a new context, there will be a new dialogue between the text and the reader. In this way, every work of literature is endlessly rewritten. If we pay too much attention to the author's intentions, life, and sources in trying to puzzle out a work, we are imposing a limit, allowing ourselves only narrow explanations, shutting the door on further possibilities of understanding and significance. Thus, we have to deemphasize the importance of the author: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (1977, 148). Looking to an author's life for insights into a work diminishes literature.

The final argument against biographical criticism might be that provided by two of the greatest all-time writers in the English language.

The first is the Pearl Poet, the name given by scholars to a writer from the late fourteenth century about whom we know absolutely nothing. After being ignored or forgotten for more than 400 years, a single manuscript by this poet was discovered in the early 1800s in the British Library. The manuscript included the grand Arthurian verse legend, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” one of the classics of English literature. By analyzing the language, scholars can deduce the general time period and region of England in which the poem was written and can make rough guesses about the social status, position, and education of the poet; otherwise, we really don’t know a single concrete thing about him—or her! Yet we can still certainly read and endlessly enjoy the wonderful tale of Sir Gawain.

William Shakespeare might be the other best example of the irrelevance of biography. What do we really know about his life? The historical record is thin—a few dozen verifiable facts that have led to four centuries of wild speculations, including recurring arguments about whether Will Shakespeare even wrote all the plays that were performed and published under his name. But the bottom line is—who cares? Do we have to know that much about Shakespeare—or whomever—to exult in those amazing plays and sonnets?

In these cases, biography seems ultimately irrelevant to our reading.

## **An Issue to Consider: Biography’s Possible Effects on Our Readings**

We may agree or disagree that knowing something about the biography of a writer can add to our enjoyment or understanding of a piece of literature, but perhaps an even harder question is whether we should let that knowledge affect our *judgment* of the work. Should our response to a work of literature be affected by our knowledge of the writer’s life? Should it make any difference in our response to the beauty of Robert Frost’s poetry that he was apparently a sourpuss who made everyone around him miserable? Why should that matter? Isn’t the fact that he made magnificent art from a mean-spirited life an inspiration? However, isn’t something taken away from the poems by knowing that they express a kind of phoniness, a falsifying of the actual facts and attitudes of the poet’s life? Doesn’t knowing about Frost’s life require us to see the hypocrisy of the poems? Or does art transcend such human frailties? Shouldn’t the poems just stand by themselves, without reference to his life?

Maybe, but such questions do stick with us. Mightn’t it affect our reading of Ezra Pound’s poems to know he moved to Italy and actively supported Benito Mussolini’s fascism during World War II? Or to know that Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a drug addict

and probably loaded on laudanum (a liquefied form of opium used as a painkiller) when he wrote “Kubla Khan”? Don’t the facts of writers’ lives become part of the overall experience we have of the writing? So does that mean we should ignore those facts or embrace them? Great debates arise from this issue.

Sometimes the life of an author is used to bring light to debates about the author’s work. One noteworthy example is the argument that seems to rear its head every few years about the appropriateness of *Huck Finn* for high school readers. The question is whether the portrayal in the novel of racism, the caricature of Jim, and the frequent use of what is probably the most negative word in American history—the “N” word—make the book unsuitable.

Critics worry that the book may lead to insensitivity or pass on racist attitudes to young readers. The heated debate, which has people of all colors on all sides, has included the use of biographical information about the life of Samuel Clemens—Mark Twain—in an attempt to resolve the question. For example, scholars have noted that Twain grew up around slave owners in Missouri but that his family owned none. We know that Twain seemed casually racist in correspondence with his mother but that he was courageously and publicly antislavery. We know he left the South as a young man and did not serve in the Confederate Army, which could have been a political statement or simple self-preservation, and that he spent most of his mature life in the North as a “Connecticut Yankee.” We know that throughout his life Twain attacked slavery and racism, including bias against Chinese workers in California, the murderous colonization in the Belgian Congo, and prejudice against Filipinos during the Spanish-American War. We know he financially supported one of the first blacks ever to go to Yale Law School. All these factual considerations have been brought to bear on the debate about *Huck Finn*, demonstrating clearly how some readers use biographical information to frame and extend their responses to a work of literature. The problem is that these activities take us away from the literary work. “Can’t we easily figure out that Twain despises slavery just by reading the book?” some readers may reasonably ask. It’s a good question. Shouldn’t a work of art like *Huck Finn* be judged on its own merits and qualities, not on our knowledge of whether Mark Twain was a prejudiced person?

And thus does the debate on biographical criticism continue.

## To Sum Up

Biographical approaches to literature indicate an age-old interest in what influence the personal facts of writers’ lives and identities might have on the works they create and the way readers receive those works. Traditional biographical criticism offers students many avenues of interesting inquiry and many opportunities for vigorous debate. Ultimately, each of us has to decide whether knowledge about the biography of a writer has any relevance to our appreciation, understanding, and judgment of the writer’s work.



# On Authorial Identity and Authenticity

One final set of questions raised by biographical criticism is even more elemental; it's about authorial *identity*. That is, should knowledge of not just the behaviors, attitudes, and characters of authors but also their very identities have any bearing on our judgments of their art? Does the background of the writer affect the *authenticity* of the writing? These questions are at the heart of serious debates that regularly erupt around books. The issue of authenticity pops up all the time, particularly with realistic fiction, in which we expect writers to be trustworthy as they imagine and inhabit characters' lives and personalities.

For example, it arose when William Styron won the 1968 Pulitzer Prize for Literature for his novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, in which Styron, a white Southern writer, imagined the psychological motivations of the slave Nat Turner, a real historical figure who led a bloody slave revolt in Virginia in 1831. The chorus of praise for the novel was nearly equaled by the chorus of criticism of Styron for trying to tell a story that some critics, black and white, said wasn't his to tell. How could Styron truly understand, went the argument, the complex realities and nuances of the African American experience?

In like fashion, a high school student criticized the portrayal of the character Loyd Peregrina in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Animal Dreams* by saying, "He's just a female author's fantasy version of a male. Barbara Kingsolver doesn't get it. No guy is like that." So this sort of questioning of the authenticity of a literary work because of the background of the author is not uncommon.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., the African American scholar and Harvard professor, has written about this issue regarding the notable case of *The Education of Little Tree*. In the late 1980s this unpublicized memoir by Forrest Carter caught on with readers by word of mouth and became a national best seller. The book tells Carter's story about being orphaned at age five during the Depression and moving to the mountains of Tennessee to learn the ways of Indians from his poor but loving Cherokee grandparents. It is a warm-hearted memoir with positive lessons about the value of family, education, tolerance, and respect for nature. Critics, including many Native Americans, offered lavish praise for the book. Many high schools added it to their curriculum, primarily because of its sensitivity and thoughtfulness about matters of ethnic identity.

Then evidence was uncovered that the writer was actually a non-Indian who had basically fabricated the whole story. That this work of fiction had been passed off as a true story likely would have made a small splash in the pool of public attention—after all, wasn't its believability evidence of the skill of the author? But what really roiled the pond was the discovery that the author had been a Ku Klux Klan member and hateful rabble-rouser who had written Alabama Governor George Wallace's notorious 1963 "Segregation Now and Segregation Forever!" speech. Immediately sales of *The Education of Little Tree* dropped, and the book was attacked for its falsification and hypocrisy.

In this case, both the reception and critical judgments of the book were clearly dependent on the biography of the author.

In discussing this memoir, Henry Louis Gates makes the case that, for good or ill, an author's background does often become part of the critical discussion of a book. But Gates rejects the idea that only Indian writers can write authentically about Indians, black writers about blacks, whites about whites, women about women, men about men, and so forth. If one of literature's noblest aims is the attempt to imagine and understand other people's perspectives, Gates says, we can't discourage writers from trying to do so. If by our criticism we confine artists to recreating only their own narrow experience, we limit both art and human relations. Even though authorial identity does matter—and may well circumscribe what an author wants and is able to write about—what ultimately matters most is the size and courage of the empathetic imagination. As Gates has written, “No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world . . . And as long as there are writers who combine some measure of imagination and curiosity, there will continue to be some interlopers in the literary imagination” (1991, 30).

Bob Shacochis, in a 1995 Harper's essay, “The Enemies of Imagination,” makes the same point (perhaps even more forcefully) that a literary artist's imagination should not be circumscribed by his own circumstances:

*If we, for political reasons, are not allowed to write about a place we've never been, or write about people whose lives we can understand only through the imagination, then literature and art will be stuck in the self-reflective light of the here and now, a solitary place inhabited only by the solipsistic me, a landscape from which the collective us has been exiled. . . . [In contrast] I try to write about people finding their own strength, discovering their own voice, and I don't care what skins they inhabit, where they live, what their sex or sexual preference happens to be, or what their ethnic, racial, and religious components are. I write about white males and white females. I write about non-white females and non-white males. I write about people who are heterosexual and those who aren't. I write about North Americans and people who aren't North Americans. In short, I write about the world as I have witnessed it and the people I have found there. I've just identified six kinds of humanity that appear in my work. Some critics would have me limit myself to one. By writing about the other five, I am guilty, these critics suggest, of exploitation, or imperialism of experience and imagination. Being a white male, they say, I cannot ever understand the experience of a female, especially a black female. I would argue that the only way I could possibly establish empathy with a black female, the only way I could possibly begin to understand her is to try, in good faith, to imagine my way into her life. I don't think there's a more powerful and positive act in the world than this. From this act comes compassion; from this act comes honesty and, one would hope, equality. The power of this act of imagination, this act of transference, is not to be underestimated. For instance, it seems*

*to me that any male who can successfully imagine his way into the experience of a woman who's been raped would never perpetrate such a crime—not after he has felt, through his imagination, her terror, her shame, her profound violation, as if it were his own. This transference is an affirmative act and a creative right that I cannot relinquish, no matter how much it might offend certain critics. Indeed, I believe more writers should exercise this right, not fewer. (13–15)*

The issue of authorial identity and its effects on readers can be fruitfully introduced into class discussions of literature.

# An Example of the Contents of a Student-Produced Biographical Criticism Anthology

Here is a description of the contents of a quick anthology by students in a class of mine some years back, with the poets and poems they chose and a brief note on the biographical connections made by the students:

- Maya Angelou, “My Guilt”—On growing up African American in the South during the Depression, transcending poverty, racism, and teenage motherhood.
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Sonnet XLIII”—On her famous late-in-life love with her husband, poet Robert Browning.
- Robert Burns’s “To a Haggis”—On Burns’s Scottish background and a recipe for haggis!
- Jimmy Carter, “The Pasture Gate”—On the ex-president’s background growing up on a farm in segregated, small-town Georgia.
- Countee Cullen, “Incident”—On Cullen’s experiences growing up black in America.
- C. Day-Lewis, “Land”—On Lewis’s Irish heritage and fatherhood.
- Emily Dickinson, “I know that He exists”—On Dickinson’s post-Puritan New England background.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Concord Hymn”—On Emerson’s sense of an American character reflected in this 1837 poem written for the commemoration of the Battle Monument in Concord, Massachusetts, where Emerson lived.
- Anne Morrow Lindbergh, “Second Sowing”—On the relationship of the poem to the kidnapping and murder of Anne Morrow and Charles Lindbergh’s baby in 1932.
- Edna St. Vincent Millay, “First Fig”—On the way the poem captures Millay’s wild bohemian public life.
- Jim Morrison (of the old rock group The Doors), untitled poem from his notebook—On the connection of images in the poem to Morrison’s background as the son of a career navy officer plus his fascination with accidents and terror beneath a suburban façade.
- Phil Ochs, “Joe Hill”—On Ochs’s background as a political songwriter of the 1960s as well as information on labor organizer Joe Hill’s life.
- Sharon Olds, “I Go Back to May 1937”—On Olds’s difficult childhood in an alcoholic family.
- Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”—On Owen’s service in World War I.
- Linda Pastan, “Marks”—On the early feminist perspective of the 1978 poem.
- E. A. Robinson, “Richard Cory”—On Robinson’s family history of public failure, tragedy, misfortune, drug addiction, and poverty in his hometown of Gardiner, Maine, the Tilbury Town of his poems.

- Dr. Seuss, “The Butter Battle”—On Theodore Geisel/Dr. Seuss’s background as a political cartoonist.
- Shakespeare’s “St. Crispin’s Day Speech” from *Henry V*—On Shakespeare’s Elizabethan-era nationalism and sense of English pride.
- William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 73”—On Shakespeare’s age when this poem was written and the generally short life spans of Elizabethans.
- William Stafford, “Serving With Gideon”—On Stafford’s Midwest upbringing and his pacifism.
- William Stafford, “Traveling Through the Dark”—On Stafford’s life in Oregon and the danger of deer on the roads to the Oregon coast.
- Christina Rossetti, “When I Am Dead”—On Rossetti’s long history as an invalid who rarely left her poetic family’s home.
- Robert Louis Stevenson, excerpt from “Requiem”—On Stevenson’s fear of and fascination with a seafaring life.
- Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”—On Thomas’s own tragically short life and his relationship with his father.
- Alice Walker, “Remember”—On Walker’s coming of age during the civil rights era as well as the fact that she’d been accidentally shot in the eye when she was eleven (with the poem’s specific reference to a “wounded eye”).
- W. B. Yeats, “An Irishman Foresees His Death”—On the death of Yeats’s friend Lady Gregory’s son in World War I.
- W. B. Yeats, “When You Are Old”—On Yeats’s love for the beautiful actress and Irish nationalist Maud Gonne, who repeatedly refused to marry him.
- A family birthday rhyme, “To Our Granddaughter”—On how this little poem was written by my student’s great-grandfather to the student’s mother when her mother was away at college.

This is a fun project that can be accomplished in about a week with motivated students.

# Historical Criticism for Students: Weighing the Historical Context of Works of Literature

By Tim Gillespie

*Every great writer is a writer of history, let him treat on almost any subject he may.*  
—Walter Savage Landor

*History is bunk.*  
—Henry Ford

## An Overview and Benefits

The main premise of *historical criticism* is that literature is not only the product of one artist's urge to say something but also a product of its historical time, shaped by the norms, hopes, fears, biases, attitudes, and limitations of the day. Thus, the best approach for a reader is to place a work of literature in its historic context and examine what contemporary issues it reflects. A key task of the historic critic is to try to recover knowledge about how humans in a particular place lived, thought, and felt when the work was written. For students or critics, this job requires research. To be a historical critic, you have to do some homework and learn something about the era during which a text was written.

Historical critics can do even more digging, if they're interested. A literary work reflects not only the *zeitgeist* or "spirit of the time" in which it was written but also perhaps the time period in which a novel is set. Thus, our study of *Hamlet* can include not only learning about Elizabethan England when Shakespeare wrote his play but also learning about medieval Denmark when the play takes place.

We can also examine the way a literary work has been understood differently by different readers over time. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, surely one of the most influential novels ever written in the United States, offers a great case study of the way a book's changing reception can be seen to mirror historical changes in a culture. When it was published in 1852, Stowe's work was a gargantuan success, eventually becoming the best-selling U.S. novel of the entire nineteenth century and the first book ever in the United States to sell a million copies. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had a huge effect in turning many readers against slavery. Yet in following decades, new generations

of critics, while still acknowledging the novel's historic value, slammed its literary value, charging Stowe with melodramatic and sentimental writing.

In the civil rights era, some African American critics blasted the novel's stereotyped black characters, particularly the long-suffering Uncle Tom. In recent decades, feminist scholars have come back to the defense of Stowe's novel, claiming that a male-dominated literary establishment has been too quick to dismiss works written by female writers as melodramatic and sentimental, thus neglecting the powerful influence of this novel on the antislavery movement. We can see in the case of reactions to this one novel over more than 150 years how historical changes in attitude affect our interpretations and responses.

Perhaps the most prominent school of literary criticism in America today is known as New Historicism. These contemporary critics see literature as a product that can best be understood and studied as part of a broader social inquiry into a culture's values and politics and how they compare with ours.

What are the benefits of historical criticism? In what ways can it support our reading of literature?

The most basic benefit is the most literal. Some works—those with references to historical events and characters with which we aren't familiar—require background historical knowledge for us to comprehend them. We can't fully understand James Emanuel's poem "Emmett Till," for example, without knowing the story of the actual Emmett Till and the tragic events of his life.

Even if historical knowledge is not absolutely necessary for understanding a literary work, it is likely to be more meaningful if the reader knows something about its historical context. For example, you will probably have a richer reading experience if you know about World War I when you read Wilfred Owen's war poems. Historical knowledge can enrich our reading experience.

Another benefit of a historical approach is its acknowledgment that we can actually use literature to learn something about history from a personal point of view. For example, we can read about the Holocaust and struggle to grasp, morally and intellectually, the horrifying notion that millions of people were killed. But the individual accounts to be found in the diary of Anne Frank hidden away in her Amsterdam attic or the memoir of Elie Wiesel force us to experience this historical tragedy through the eyes of other human beings—individuals like us. The statistic of 6 million deaths is perhaps felt more fully when we identify with single lives presented in works of literature.

There is a danger, however, in this idea that we can understand history more deeply by reading literature. When we read literature, can we assume that the history is accurate? Fiction is an act of human imagination that has no particular responsibility to facts or truth. So how can literature be a trustworthy way to learn history? A wise reader will always keep in mind that literature is a product of the human imagination as much as a product of its time.

## Limitations and Critiques of Historical Criticism

Some scholars believe that historical criticism narrows our appreciation. The world's great works of literature, they argue, have lasted precisely because they are not yoked to their narrow historical context; they are transcendent because of their timeless significance. Not too many of us care any more about all the complex historical references and Elizabethan political issues in *Hamlet*. Its lasting value is not what it teaches us about the temporal history of Elizabethan England but what it teaches us about the eternal human condition.

### To Sum Up

Historical criticism offers lots of good questions for readers: What historical research is absolutely necessary to understand this work fully? What historical knowledge adds depth to a reading of the work? What insights does the literary work give us into history—the history of its author's time, the history about the time in which the work is set, the history of different eras as reflected in the work's reception over time, or the history of our day?

Historical criticism marks the age-old interest in the influence of historical events of a period on writers and their works, offering readers and students many possibilities for inquiries into literature, history, and their intricate interrelations.



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## An Overview

The main premise of *historical criticism* is that literature is not only the product of one artist's urge to say something but also a product of its historical circumstances, shaped by its social and political context and the norms, hopes, fears, customs, attitudes, and limitations of the day.

Although we often hear that great literature transcends its time, a historical critic asserts that great literature is deeply mired in its time. Thus, the best approach is to place literature in its historic context and examine what contemporary issues, anxieties, and biases the work of literature reflects, struggles with, or resists. A key task of the historic critic, then, is to try to recover knowledge about how humans in a particular place lived, thought, and felt when the work was written. For students or critics, this job requires research.

The implications of historical criticism run deep. For historical critics, even interpretive problems are often best solved by using historical tools. An old question about Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, is why Hamlet dithers around so much about getting revenge on King Claudius for killing his father, and centuries of scholars have examined the young prince's complex psychological motivations. In contrast, historical critics look to interpret Hamlet's puzzling behavior by examining Elizabethan politics and the era's beliefs and debates about power, legitimacy, royal succession, and religious restraints. From this viewpoint, the key to understanding Hamlet's inaction may lie less in psychoanalysis than in historical analysis.

There are other emphases of historical criticism. As the German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770–1831) said, all cultural acts develop in the light of human history. Hegel used

the term *zeitgeist*, or “spirit of the times,” to describe the collective energies of thought and feeling of a particular place and time. By this way of thinking, literary works will always reflect and help define that specific historic spirit. In this vein, scholars often identify *literary movements* connected to particular historical contexts. For example, a disparate group of English writers (Lord Byron, John Keats, Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge) have been lumped together into a movement called the British Romantic Poets, whose various works can perhaps all be understood as a common artistic reaction against the effects of the dawning industrial age. For another example, the Hungarian theorist Georg Lukács (1885–1971), in his influential 1920 work *Theory of the Novel*, linked the rise of the novel, which is typically a story of the individual establishing his place in a difficult world, to the rise of individualistic-oriented bourgeois culture in Europe.

In his 1950 essay “The Sense of the Past,” American thinker Lionel Trilling asserted that literature is actually historical in three different ways: Each literary work is (1) a historic artifact of its own time, (2) a part of the historic tradition of its form (whether novel, lyric poetry, or whatever), and (3) a timeline of the changing ways the work has been understood by readers over the ages. A poem is thus not only the poem that the poet intended but also the poem that was perceived one way in its own time and differently in different eras since, having different influences on readers because of changing historical conditions. Thus, the study of any literary work can fruitfully include inquiry into how that work has been read in different eras, giving us some insight into historical trends by those differing readings over time.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, surely one of the most influential novels ever written in the United States, offers a great case study of the way a book’s changing reception can be seen to mirror historical changes in a culture. When it was published in 1852, Stowe’s work was a gargantuan success, eventually becoming the best-selling U.S. novel of the entire nineteenth century and the first book ever in the United States to sell a million copies. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had a huge effect in promoting the abolitionist cause and turning many Northerners against slavery. Years later, in the early months of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln even famously called Stowe “the little lady who started this big war” for her novel’s dramatization of slavery’s immorality.

Yet in following decades, new generations of critics, while still acknowledging the novel’s historic value, slammed its literary value, charging Stowe with melodramatic and sentimental writing. And while many African American writers such as Frederick Douglass and Langston Hughes praised *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for its clear moral goal of depicting slavery as evil, other later African American writers were not as generous. James Baldwin, in his 1949 essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” was scathing about what he thought was not only the novel’s sentimentality but also some of its stereotyped black characters, particularly the long-suffering, timid Uncle Tom, whose name has long been used by African Americans to describe other blacks viewed as excessively subservient or sellouts.

In recent decades, however, a new generation of feminist scholars has come back to defend Stowe's novel, claiming that a male-dominated literary establishment has been too quick to dismiss works written by female writers for female readers as melodramatic and sentimental, thus neglecting in this case the powerful influence of women on the abolitionist movement.

We can see in the case of the reactions to this one novel over the last 150 years how historical changes in attitude affect our interpretations and responses.

Perhaps the most prominent school of literary criticism in America today is known as New Historicism. These contemporary historical critics see literature as one cultural product that can best be understood and studied as part of a broader social inquiry. Thus, they tend to compare literary texts of a period to all kinds of writing—personal letters, advertisements, diaries, tabloids, jokes, children's stories, pamphlets, political broadsides, popular songs, cartoons, graffiti—as well as to other cultural representations from fashion to political rhetoric to music. In this endeavor, they aim to pull great authors and their works down from a pedestal and plunk them down for study into the lively streets of their historical periods. As with other kinds of historical critics, they see literature and history as interlinked fields of study.

## Benefits of Historical Criticism

In what ways can historical criticism support and enrich the reading of literature?

The most basic benefit is the most literal. Some works—those with references to historical events and characters with which we aren't familiar—require background knowledge. Without some historical context, they are just flat-out incomprehensible. We can't fully understand James Emanuel's poem "Emmett Till," for example, without knowing the true story of the actual person Emmett Till and the tragic events of his life. And William Shakespeare's plays have so many references to unfamiliar events, objects, practices, beliefs, and people that we usually need almost as many pages of historic notes as there are pages in the play to understand the action or even at times the language. To read most literary works of the past usually requires some translation of their historical context.

Any novel, short story, poem, or play located in a specific period is likely to be more meaningful if the reader knows something about its historical context. For example, you will likely have a richer reading experience if you know about World War I when you read Wilfred Owen's war poems. And it probably helps to know something about the Great Depression when you read John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* or Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio*. Historical knowledge can enrich our reading experience.

Another benefit of a historical approach is its acknowledgment that we can actually use literature to learn something about history. One of the early proponents of historical criticism, a French scholar with the interesting name Hippolyte Taine, wrote that since

all artworks are determined by an author's personal background, environment, and historic era, a literary critic's main goal should be to research the historic context of the work to "make the past present." Interestingly, Taine implied that the benefits of this process were even greater for our understanding of history than for our understanding of literature. As he wrote in the opening line of his influential 1863 *History of English Literature*, "History has been transformed . . . by the study of literature" (1974, 309). Thus does historical criticism become a reciprocal process: as history illuminates for us a novel or poem, so does the novel or poem illuminate history. In this way, the act of reading literature is a form of historical research.

Perhaps the main way literature can illuminate history is in the way it focuses on the individual. At the heart of lasting literary works is invariably a strong, distinctive individual voice and consciousness. Enthusiastic readers often talk about the way they temporarily adopt that voice, identify with a character, or learn to see the world from a different angle through the eyes of a literary character. When we are empathetically engaged with literature, we are invited to think and feel other than we normally do—as another human might. We then have to consider the differences between our experience and that of others and face the commonalities and contradictions. In this sense, literature is personal.

Compare this with Josef Stalin's chillingly perceptive, widely quoted statement, "A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic." Statistics are impersonal. In its attention to the singular, literature is an antidote to statistics. For example, we can read about the Holocaust and struggle to grasp, morally and intellectually, the horrifying notion of the genocide of millions of people. But the individual accounts to be found in the diary of Anne Frank hidden away in her Amsterdam attic, the novels *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry or *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron, and the memoirs of Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi force us to experience this historical tragedy through the eyes of other human beings—individuals like us. We must confront the enormity of the historic fact of 6 million deaths, but perhaps we can feel more fully that enormous loss through an engagement with the single lives presented in works of literature.

Any competent work of history, of course, will likewise not only offer the big trends and questions that animate an age but will also illuminate individual human experiences of that time. But literature can help in this project of personalizing and particularizing history.

Thus, historical criticism, say its proponents, has much to offer to students of both literature and history.

## Limitations and Critiques of Historical Criticism

The benefits of a historical approach to literature seem pretty clear. Beyond gaining tidbits of historical fact necessary to our literal comprehension, do we really need to know all that much about the historical context of most literary works to understand or

appreciate them? No, some scholars emphatically answer. The American New Critics of the mid-twentieth century, for example, dismissed historical study as an approach that narrows our appreciation of literature. According to their argument, the world's great and lasting pieces of literature, even though located in particular historical eras and often including commentary on historical political and social events, actually have lasted precisely because they are not yoked to their narrow historical circumstances; they are transcendent because of their timeless significance.

Look at all the complex history swirling around *Hamlet*. When the play was written in 1600 or so, the long reign of Queen Elizabeth was on the wane. The aging queen was in poor health and had recently been threatened by a group of rebels who were tried for treason after they attempted to storm the palace and overthrow her. Some historians say that Shakespeare and his theater troupe came close to being executed along with the conspirators because one of the rebels had paid the popular company of actors to perform *Richard II*, in which a weak king is forced to abdicate. This was seen by some of Elizabeth's supporters as part of a propaganda campaign to justify the attempted overthrow of the Queen. Not long after this incident, Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, which can be interpreted in the light of these events. In the larger historic sense, the play can be seen as reflecting the insecurity of many English citizens during this uneasy time. This uneasiness fed the belief that a state was precarious without a strong monarch, an idea also supported by the era's religious notions about the rigidly hierarchical nature of the universe. So *Hamlet*, a play about the dangers of disorderly states and challenges to hierarchical authority, fits the historic circumstance of Shakespeare's day. In addition, that Shakespeare included a scene in which a play is performed in an unsuccessful attempt to depose a reigning king seems like it must, in some way, refer to his own personal situation with regards to the rebellion. Maybe the play was his way of communicating his belief in a strong monarchy to his queen, writing to please her and save his own neck.

Other historical matters suffuse the play. For example, a number of the characters in *Hamlet* are believed to be satires of prominent figures of Shakespeare's day, most notably the blowhard Polonius, who some scholars say is a spitting image of the famously talkative Lord Burghley. In terms of Shakespeare's personal history, his father had died not long before he wrote this play about a son's grief for a father's death. Furthermore, Shakespeare had also lost to illness his own son, a boy named Hamnet, at a distressingly young age.

These and countless other historical issues posed by *Hamlet* have been discussed ceaselessly for centuries. But here's the question the New Critics ask: Who cares? What difference does it make that some rebels wanted to topple Queen Elizabeth or that Polonius is based on some guy named Lord Burghley or that Shakespeare's son's name was similar to his literary character's name? We can get a full, rich understanding of the play without knowing any of this historical data. The only relevant reading act is to focus on the literary text. Everything else is a distraction from the work of art. *Hamlet's* lasting value is not what it teaches us about the temporal history of Elizabethan England but what it teaches us about the eternal human condition.

Furthermore, the assumption of historical criticism that writers and their works are tightly limited by the particular historical contexts in which they live is questionable. Artists are often visionaries and resisters who travel off the common intellectual paths of their age. Shakespeare again offers a great example: In Elizabethan drama, there are about a half-dozen representations of Moors (Arabic peoples from North Africa), and in every case, these dark-skinned outsiders are portrayed with racist overtones as villains or fools. But this is not the case with Shakespeare's Moor Othello, who is presented to us as a full, complex human being with plenty of nobility to match his great faults. In this and many other instances, goes this argument, Shakespeare is an example of an artist not being bound by the historical determinants of his age. Many great writers are considered great precisely because they are not limited by the historical contexts in which they lived and wrote.

There is one more final danger to caution readers about when considering historical criticism. Remember that idea from the French scholar Hippolyte Taine that we can understand history more deeply by reading literature? There's an obvious peril in this assumption. The discipline of history has traditional standards of establishing credibility, finding evidence, confirming facts, presenting multiple viewpoints, and crediting sources to be fair to the truth of what happened. But literature doesn't have the same professional boundaries. As an acknowledged invention, it has no particular responsibility to facts. When we read literature, then, can we assume that the history is accurate? And does it matter in a work of literature, which is supposed to be *made up*? When we read a novel, whether set in the present or the past, are we really learning the truth about historical events? Without doing extensive verification ourselves, how can we vouch for a fiction's historical accuracy? Is literature a trustworthy way to learn history?

So there are problems in Hippolyte Taine's assertion that literature can teach us about history. Though literature can be a great way to inspire interest in history and to dramatize history in terms of its effects on individual humans, the wise reader will always keep in mind that literature is a product of the author's imagination as much as a product of its time or its research.

To sum up, opponents of historical criticism believe that there are many problems in this approach and that readers can get plenty of meaning out of a work without knowledge of its historical context.

## **An Issue to Consider: Mediocre Literature of Historic Importance**

Some literature, it should be pointed out, is generally seen as having more historic than literary value. As previously discussed, although Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been as influential as anything ever written in the United States and has plenty of fans, many critics argue that it's not a great piece of literature—

because its characters are stereotypes and its actions melodramatic.

In similar fashion, we can recognize the value and impact of muckraking novels such as Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (which exposed railroad monopolies in the West) or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (which exposed horrific conditions for workers in the Chicago meatpacking industry and led to the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906), though the literary merit of these novels is also questionable.

Sometimes, in other words, literature is remembered more for its historic impact than for its literary merit.

## To Sum Up

Historical criticism offers lots of good questions for readers of a work of literature: What historical research is absolutely necessary to understand this work fully? What further historical knowledge adds depth to a reading of the work? What insights does the literary work give us into history—the history of its author's time, the history about the time in which the work is set, the history of different eras as reflected in the work's reception over time, or the history of our day?

Historical criticism marks the age-old interest in the influence of historical events of a period on writers and their works, offering readers and students many possibilities for inquiries into literature, history, and their intricate interweaving.

# Psychological Criticism for Students: Using Literature to Understand Human Behavior

By Tim Gillespie

## An Overview and Benefits

Psychology is the endlessly fascinating science of human mind and behavior, and it can be a rewarding tool for enhancing our understanding and appreciation of literature—and of ourselves.

Psychological criticism can be employed in many ways:

1. A reader can explore the psychologies of fictional characters, working to understand their actions and motives. This is probably the most common form of psychological criticism. The behaviors of complex characters intrigue us: Why does Huck Finn seek a father figure in the runaway slave Jim? Why does Maxine Hong Kingston plague the other little Chinese-American girl who is so similar to her in *Woman Warrior*? What causes Hamlet to be so indecisive? Why does Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* go—literally—underground? We can then use various psychological frameworks—Sigmund Freud's theory of the personality or idea of the Oedipus conflict, Otto Rank's ideas about the mythic hero story, Carl Jung's theory of the personality, or many others—to try to help us understand these characters. Wondering about such questions of human behavior and perception in literature is the centerpiece of psychological criticism.
2. A reader can explore the psychology of a writer as expressed in a work. This approach comes largely from the ideas of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the Austrian physician who revolutionized our thinking about how the psyche operates. Freud basically invented psychiatry, and he had perceptive things to say about dreams, creativity, power, hysteria, neuroses, happiness, and literature. Though much of Freud's work is challenged today, his insights and concepts have nonetheless had a profound effect on our understanding of the human mind and behavior.

The core contribution of Freud is his emphasis on the unconscious. He envisioned human behavior as motivated by psychic forces over which we have limited conscious control. Freud connected this idea to literature in a 1908 essay, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in which he links the motivating force behind creative writing with that of dreams and fantasies. Just as children construct alternate worlds of fantasy to fulfill their wishes and explore their fears, so do writers work out their secret desires and anxieties in fictional form. Thus,



characters' issues are actually the writer's issues, displaced into the story. Even though the deeper meanings may be shielded from the writer's awareness, the creative expression of subconscious feelings is the focus of literature.

The psychological critic thus reads the literary work as a psychiatrist reads a patient's narrative, working to understand and explain the writer's issues.

3. A reader can explore the psychology of a culture or society as revealed in literary works. French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) stressed that any text offers insights not just into an author's individual psyche but also into the make-up of the society and culture from which it springs. So the issues in any literary work don't just belong to the individual writer but also to his or her time and place.
4. A reader can explore the psychology of reader response, including his or her own. Psychological criticism isn't just about understanding the psychological issues of *others*—whether literary characters or authors or a whole society. When we read a novel, inhabit the writer's consciousness and empathize with the writer's characters, we also have a chance to live out vicariously our own desires and fears without shame or self-reproach. As writing is therapeutic for writers, so can reading be therapeutic for readers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thus, a psychological approach enlarges the number of interpretive strategies we use while reading. The larger purpose is that readers, in learning about applying psychological insights to literary characters, authors, and texts, might learn to better apply those insights to themselves, their relationships, and their own cultures. Or, as a student said in a classroom discussion of *Hamlet*, “We read literature not just for insight about how the characters think and feel but about how *we* think and feel.”

As we gain knowledge about human behavior, we can understand ourselves and other people better, to the long-range benefit of our personal psychological health and our society's psychological health.

## Limitations and Critiques of Psychological Criticism

Psychological literary criticism has its weaknesses. One is the requirement that users have a solid knowledge of complex psychological theories.

Another weakness is that psychological criticism lacks interest in the artistic qualities of literature. Psychology is interested in the *processes* of mental activity, but works of literature are artistic *products*. Psychological critics use art to expound on human behavior but don't have much to tell us about art itself.

## To Sum Up

Psychology and literature are closely related fields of human inquiry. Writers use psychological insights to inform their art, and psychologists use literature to assist their research into human behavior. Readers can do the same.

The question at the heart of psychology is, Why do I—or you—act that way? The goal is to understand the forces, often hidden, that affect behavior, particularly when that behavior is negative or unproductive. The assumption is that when we comprehend these complex forces better, reasonable self-mastery will result.

Psychological literary criticism has similar goals—understanding better the forces and underlying motivations of a literary character, an author, or a culture. The hope is that readers, after they have quietly shut the pages of a work, will return to their everyday worlds with more understanding of their own natures and more understanding of and empathy for the nature of their fellow humans.

# Psychological Criticism for Students: Using Literature to Understand Human Behavior

By Tim Gillespie

*The most fascinating thing in literature to me is psychological motivation. Why do characters do the things they do, react in particular ways, and become affected by events in a specific manner?*

—Amanda Micossi, student

## An Overview

Psychology is the endlessly fascinating science of human mind and behavior, and it can be a rewarding tool for enhancing our understanding and appreciation of literature—and of ourselves.

Complex literary characters and their behaviors fascinate us: Why does Huck seek a father figure in Jim? Why does Maxine Hong Kingston plague the other little Chinese-American girl who is so similar to her in her memoir *Woman Warrior*? Why is Catherine Earnshaw so drawn to that brute Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*? What causes Hamlet to be so indecisive? Why does Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* go—literally—underground?

Perhaps we then start wondering about the authors who created these works and the extent to which their characters are enacting their creators’ own deepest wishes and fears. And we might further wonder about the culture and times that produced the psychological dynamics in literary works, for each historic place and era has its own particular issues. We might even ponder the roots of our own psychological fascinations with these stories. Thus, psychological criticism offers many different approaches to a work of literature.

There is nothing new about a psychological criticism. More than 2,000 years ago, Aristotle discussed in his *Poetics* the psychological reaction of *catharsis*—that potent stew of sorrow, pity, and fear—that he believed great tragedies evoked in audience members. Since then, many other commentators have likewise talked about psychological dimensions of literature; thus, this approach has long been part of the tradition of literary criticism. There are many different psychological theories and models we can fruitfully use as we read stories, plays, and poems. However, most psychological criticism of the last century lands at the doorstep of Sigmund Freud.

Freud (1856–1939) was an Austrian physician who revolutionized thinking about how the psyche operates. His work on the origin and treatment of mental illness forms the basis of modern psychiatry, and he invented psychoanalysis, the “talking cure” that has influenced most mental health and counseling practices ever since. This Viennese scientist had perceptive things to say about dreams, creativity, power, hysteria, neuroses, happiness, and literature. Though much of Freud’s work is today challenged and at times discounted, his insights have nonetheless had a profound effect. The concepts Freud developed, including notions as familiar as “denial” and “passive-aggressive behavior,” are part of our daily speech and thinking. Freud is one of the most influential thinkers of the last century.

Freud’s core contribution is his emphasis on the unconscious. He envisioned human behavior as motivated by psychic forces over which we have limited conscious control. Freud connected this idea to literature and literary criticism in a 1908 essay, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” in which he links the motivating force behind creative writing with that of dreams and fantasies. Just as children construct alternate worlds of fantasy to fulfill their wishes and explore their fears, so do writers work out their latent desires in fictional form. Because adults feel more shame about disturbing dreams, fantasies, and impermissible secret wishes than children do, says Freud, adults tend to bury or conceal them in unconscious ways. These desires and fears, inexpressible because of social norms and religious taboos, hide away in our unconscious only to emerge every now and then in masked forms such as dreams, slips of the tongue, or neurotic behavior. Or they can be transfigured by creative activity. The imaginative writer shapes repressed material into the acceptable form of a literary text in which the characters’ issues are also the writer’s issues. In our dreams and life, Freud says, we sometimes displace our anxieties onto the image of another, which is exactly what fiction writers do in their art. In this way, the hero and the love interest and the villain and the scary ogre can all be read as unconscious manifestations of a writer’s desires and fears. Even though the deeper meanings are largely shielded from the writer’s awareness, the creative expression of these subconscious feelings offers much satisfaction to a writer.

No wonder Freud calls the writer “a dreamer in broad daylight,” which seems an apt description. Think about all the ways a novel, for example, operates like a dream. An invention of a mind, a novel offers a vivid narrative about a partly familiar but partly strange world that is not exactly true but that seems real. In the experience of the novel, as in a dream, our most urgent desires may be romantically realized and our most terrible fears nightmarishly visited. And in a dream, certain objects or images may have powerful significance, representing disturbing feelings that have been transformed into a symbolic element. This again mirrors a common novelist’s use of powerful symbols.

The literary work, then, can be considered akin to a dream or confession shared by a patient with an analyst. The psychological critic reads the literary work as an analyst reads a patient’s narrative, unearthing subterranean materials, decoding symbols that reveal unconscious obsessions, working to understand and explain deeper camouflaged

meanings. From this viewpoint, the acts of literary criticism and psychoanalysis look quite similar.

But what does all this have to do with us everyday readers? Freud says there are wider implications than just witnessing others' problems. As we inhabit the writer's consciousness and empathize with the writer's characters, we also have a chance to vicariously live out our own desires and fears without shame or self-reproach. As writing can be therapeutic for writers, so can reading be therapeutic for readers.

The ultimate goal of psychoanalyzing a text is not just to expose some hidden shame of the author but to illuminate the complexities of humans and texts in general—all to make us better readers of ourselves and of other people as well as of literature. Or, as a student said in a classroom discussion of *Hamlet*, "We read literature not just for insight about how the characters think and feel but about how *we* think and feel."

Thus, Freud provided a framework for us to analyze both the author and the effect of a work on its readers. In his own writings over his career, Freud applied his ideas to fairy tales as well as to works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, and many others. Literature played an important part in his thinking. He said, in a widely reported 1940 conversation, "Not I but the poets discovered the unconscious." He read broadly and sprinkled his work liberally with literary quotations, insights, and examples. His most famous literary rumination must surely be his analysis in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) of the ancient Greek play *Oedipus Rex*. In this short essay, Freud formulated his theory of the *Oedipus complex* based on the enduring power of Sophocles' stage play. Freud's idea is that during one of the stages young boys go through (between the ages of two and three), they become particularly attached to their mother and see their father as the main rival for their mother's affection. Most boys pass naturally through this developmental stage ultimately to have a reasonably healthy relationship with both parents, but some get fixated at this stage and can't get beyond their attraction to their mother and their hatred for their father. Even those who do pass through this stage will have any residual feelings of outsized desire for mother and anger at father firmly locked into their unconscious, because those feelings aren't socially acceptable. In Sophocles' play, the hero Oedipus, who unknowingly marries his mother and kills his father, is in effect living out these buried feelings all males have—and he eventually pays serious consequences for his acts. Freud felt the power of this 2,000-year-old play is in the way it dramatizes men's buried feelings but makes them safe to unearth because they are projected onto a character who is ultimately punished in the play.

Freud's application of psychoanalytic theory to literature in this way spread like a virus. The notion that there's always a psychological subtext to any work, a dimension beneath the surface controlled by unseen forces, gave critics new tools to analyze literature in lively new ways.

In 1909, for example, the psychoanalyst Otto Rank, Freud's closest associate, published *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*. In this book, Rank subscribes to Freud's notion that the artist turns a powerful, secret wish into a literary fantasy, and he extends the Oedipal theory to explain the similarities of so many heroes' tales in popular literature, from

Gilgamesh to Hercules to Moses—all these heroes having been abandoned as threats to a father and eventually ending up taking their fathers' exalted places. This, Rank explains, is a way to symbolize every male's complex relationship with his father, which evolves from worship to disappointment to replacement. Thus, myths and literature about heroes are simply expressions that different cultures have given to common childhood psychological experiences and their resolutions.

In 1910, a follower and eventual biographer of Freud, the English psychiatrist Ernest Jones, applied Freud's theories to *Hamlet* in a famous essay. Why does Hamlet hesitate so agonizingly to take revenge on his uncle? Because, Jones says, Claudius has done what Hamlet unconsciously wishes he himself could have done: kill his father and marry his mother. If Hamlet punishes Claudius, he is in effect punishing himself. Like Freud, Jones believed that literary texts that endure are those—like *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*—that tap into the shared fantasies of all humankind, which makes them particularly appealing.

More recently, the American scholar Norman N. Holland became interested in the intersections of art and psychology. Holland asserted that each of us responds differently to a literary work, because each of us has unique *identity themes* we are seeking out. As we quietly get lost in the pages of a novel under a solitary reading lamp, we experience through the text our own unique individual unconscious desires and anxieties. The book, however, comforts us. Bound and held in our hands, a book offers the reassurance that we can protect our egos even as we identify with the less-than-admirable behavior of characters, that we can master our desires, and that we can transform unruly dream material into the comforting search for a socially acceptable meaning.

Other recent thinkers, including the challenging French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, have extended psychoanalytic criticism from the individual domain to the social realm. Lacan asserted that any text offers insights into not only our personal psyches but also our society's psyche. Repeated images of snakes in a story may thus not express an author's personal preoccupation with male equipment, as an older Freudian might assert, but rather may reflect a cultural preoccupation with images of male power. Today's psychological critics, in other words, often applies their methods to thinking about group and social psychology as well as individual psychology.

From this quick overview of literary critics who've followed in Freud's footsteps, we can see how big Freud's shoes were. His theories, including his idea of personality being a dynamic between the id, ego, and superego and his concept of defense mechanisms, have spread widely.

But the shadow Freud casts shouldn't obscure the contributions of scores of other psychological thinkers to our understanding of human behavior. Plenty of other thinkers, including adversaries of Freud, have constructed psychological theories that are useful for applying to a study of literature. We can use Carl Jung's concept of personality or the collective unconscious, Erik Erickson's stages of psychosocial development, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, Lawrence Kohlberg's theory about stages of moral reasoning and Carol Gilligan's critique of it, Irvin Yalom's existential psychology, Daniel Goleman's synthesis of ideas about emotional intelligence, and many other psychological

frameworks and notions to give us new ways to think about what we read. Freud doesn't have a monopoly on the market.

## Benefits of Psychological Criticism

The overview above of Freud and his heirs offers glimpses of all the different ways psychological criticism can be employed:

1. A reader can explore the psychology of a writer as expressed in a work of art, though this requires some study of the writer's life and experiences.
2. A reader can explore the psychologies of fictional characters, plumbing their motives. An example is Ernest Jones's analysis of why Hamlet hesitates to act against his father's murderer. This is probably the most common way to use psychological criticism as a way to understand human behavior.
3. A reader can explore the psychology of a culture or society as revealed in literary works. Huck Finn's itchy-footedness might symbolize the historic American ideal of masculine individuality and the way it is associated with the frontier—along with the fear of being domesticated or feminized.
4. A reader can explore the psychology of reader response. Examples include Freud's reasoning about the source of *Oedipus Rex's* continued popularity with audiences, Otto Rank's analysis of the enduring appeal of heroes to readers, and Norman Holland's ideas about how literature lets us explore in safety our own psychological issues.

Thus, a psychological approach enlarges the number of interpretive strategies we use while reading. But there's a larger end. Where a skeptic might ask, "Who cares if Hamlet had Oedipal issues?" or "What difference does it make that Heathcliff represents the id, Edgar the superego, and Catherine the ego in *Wuthering Heights*?" Framed that way, the psychological approach seems inconsequential. So let's reframe: The larger purpose is that readers, in learning about applying psychological insights to authors, literary characters, and texts, might learn to better apply those insights to themselves, their relationships, and their own cultures. As we gain knowledge about human behavior, we can understand ourselves and other people better, to the long-range benefit of our personal psychological health and our society's psychological health.

## Limitations and Critiques of Psychological Criticism

Some of the challenges to psychological literary criticism are really challenges to Freud's ideas in particular, while others question more broadly this approach to reading.

An example of the former is concern with Freud's sexism, typical of the views of most of his nineteenth-century European peers. Women to him (or at least the unhappy upper-class women he treated) were passive, narcissistic, penis-envying creatures prone to hysteria. He even said in a 1926 essay that much of female psychology to him was a "dark continent." Challenges to his knowledge about women extend to his literary theories. Okay, we may grant, the source of the enduring appeal of both *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* is the way the "universal" Oedipal conflict is expressed in them. But, um, why then would the plays ever appeal to *women*? Isn't the Oedipus complex a *male* construct? Where do women fit in Freud's world and in the criticism derived from it? How can Freud claim universality for his male-oriented theories?

Another criticism of Freud is that his theories are oversexed. Seeing literary symbols primarily in terms of sex narrows interpretation rather than broadening it. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud enumerates the meanings of many dream symbols: elongated objects (he mentions sticks, hammers, guns, daggers, swords, and, for some reason, women's hats) all represent the male genitalia, while small boxes, chests, cupboards, ovens, ships, and, in fact, all cavities, represent the female genitalia. Some readers take this dream taxonomy and use it to find sexual symbolism in virtually all literary images: What's the deeper meaning of the knight with lance in hand seeking the chalice that is the Holy Grail? Sex, of course. And when Macbeth fantasizes about seeing the dagger, handle toward his hand? It's a phallus, of course, related to his wife's continual admonition that he should be a man, and of course Macbeth really unconsciously wants to castrate and take the place of Duncan, who is a father-figure to him. Little Red Riding Hood? This old Grimm tale is really, of course, about a sexual power struggle between the plucky young virgin, whose red cap symbolizes menstruation, and the ruthless wolf, whose big teeth represent rapacious sexual hunger. To some skeptics of psychological criticism, this orgy of sexual symbol-seeking is a reductive kind of interpretation.

(To be fair to Freud, however, he did caution that dream images are often not sufficiently universal for use in general interpretation. Most symbols in a dream are in a private language known only to the dreamer. So perhaps every concave object in a story doesn't necessarily represent the female and every convex object the male. Freud himself once wittily said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." Of course, he could never give up his addiction to cigars and after some thirty operations to fight the disease, eventually died of cancer of the jaw. So maybe there is more to it, just as there does seem to be an ominous undertow of sexual threat in the Red Riding Hood story, doesn't there?)

This discussion, however, leads to a more general critique of a psychological approach. If most symbols are private and must be worked out by a long, complex personal analysis with a highly trained professional, how do we untrained, everyday readers analyze a writer's unique dreamscape? Do we have to hand over the interpretation of literary works to psychological specialists and then trust their interpretations? Psychological criticism does not seem welcoming to an amateur. And there are certainly many opportunities for shallow speculation and the misapplication of psychological theories.



Another gripe about psychological criticism is that its proponents lack interest in any of the artistic qualities of literature. Psychology is interested in the processes of mental activity, but works of literature are artistic products. Psychological critics use art to expound on human behavior but don't have much to tell us about the art itself. Freud is a good example. In his comments on *Hamlet*, *Oedipus*, and other works, he doesn't display much concern with the aesthetic appeal of these works. Isn't he therefore missing something? Isn't part of the enduring appeal of *Oedipus Rex* not just the psychological insight but also the fiendishly clever unfolding of the mystery and the play's rip-roaring dialogues? And haven't centuries of audiences been drawn to *Hamlet* by the fascinating twists of plot and the magnificent poetry of Shakespeare's language? Is the appeal of these works solely attributable to their subterranean psychological dimensions? Isn't a large measure of their success also due to their literary artistry? You wouldn't know from most works of psychological criticism.

## To Sum Up

Psychology and literature are closely related fields of human inquiry. Writers use psychological insights to inform their art, and psychologists use literature to assist their research into human behavior. Readers can do the same.

The question at the heart of psychology is, Why do I—or you—act that way? The goal is to understand the forces, often hidden, that affect behavior, particularly when that behavior is negative or unproductive. The assumption is that when we comprehend these complex forces better, reasonable self-mastery will result.

Psychological literary criticism has similar goals—understanding better the forces and underlying motivations of a literary character, an author, or a culture. A psychological critic asks these kinds of questions: What can we learn about psychology, the workings of mind and behavior, from this literary text? What is its psychological appeal to readers? What psychological issues does it explore? What might the text reveal about the psychology of the author, or the author's society, or our society today? What models of human mind or psychology might help us understand the text better?

The hope is that readers, after they have quietly shut the pages of a work, will return to their everyday worlds with more understanding of their own natures and more understanding of and empathy for the nature of their fellow humans.

# Some Other Useful Psychological Theories and Frameworks for Analyzing Literature

All of the following can be applied to literary characters and texts.

- Plato's Theory of the Human Psyche, in which intellect, will and appetite must be kept in balance. Applies well to any out-of-balance literary character.
- Carl Jung's Theory of Personality, in which the four aspects of intellect, emotion, sensation, and intuition should be in balance in an individual; if so, the person is mentally healthy or *individuated*. Applies well to any character in crisis.
- Carl Jung's idea about *personas* (the public masks we construct) as well as his concepts of the *anima* (female qualities in the male) and *animus* (male qualities in the female). The latter applies particularly well to *Wuthering Heights* or any male-female story in which two characters seek to complete each other or seek to avoid the projected self they see in the other.
- B. F. Skinner's Behaviorism. Applies particularly well to *Brave New World* and Skinner's own awful novel, *Walden II*.
- Robert Ardrey's Theory of Human Needs, which asserts that the three inherent human needs for security, identity, and stimulus are sometimes in conflict. Applies particularly well to *Lord of the Flies*.
- Abraham Maslow's Hierarchical Theory of Human Needs, which claims that our inherent needs must be satisfied in a certain order, starting with basic physiological needs and proceeding in order to safety, belonging or affiliation, esteem, and finally self-actualization. Applies particularly well to *Lord of the Flies*.
- Daniel Goleman's synthesis of ideas about "EQ," the idea that emotional intelligence consists of a set of personal competencies (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation) and social competencies (empathy, social skills). Applies particularly well to assessing the maturity of any literary character.
- The Holmes-Rahe Stress Scale, which classifies life events that cause stress and illness. Applies particularly well to any literary character under great stress. (Young Hamlet, for example, is off the charts. No wonder he goes wiggy!)
- Erik Erickson's Stages of Psychosocial Development, a developmental theory that each physical age has its own unique tension to be resolved and any lack of resolution can plague adults: For infants the issue is trust vs. mistrust, for toddlers the issue is autonomy vs. shame and doubt, for preschoolers initiative vs. guilt, for elementary schoolers competence vs. inferiority, for adolescents identity vs. role confusion, for young adults intimacy vs. isolation, for those in midlife generativity

vs. stagnation, and for seniors integrity vs. despair. Applies particularly well to any character stuck on the cusp of any of these ages.

- Lawrence Kohlberg's Stage Theory of Moral Reasoning, which offers a developmental theory of morality, stretching from a child's preconventional stage (during which moral development is a matter of self-interest, punishment, and reward) to a conventional stage (during which morality is largely about gaining approval or avoiding disapproval, or about viewing morality in terms of laws and social norms) to a rarely obtained postconventional stage (in which morality is a matter of embracing abstract ethical principles beyond all self-interest). Applies particularly well to any character making moral decisions.
- Carol Gilligan on gender differences in moral reasoning. Applies particularly well to any character making moral decisions, especially in contrast to Kohlberg's ideas or when male and female characters reason differently on issues.
- Stanley Milgram's experiments on obedience, which asserts that we can all succumb to evil deeds given the right social conditions. Applies particularly well to *1984* and other political novels.

# Archetypal Criticism for Students: Finding the Mythic Resonance

By Tim Gillespie

*Old myths, old gods, old heroes have never died. They are only sleeping at the bottom of our mind, waiting for our call. We have need for them. They represent the wisdom of our race.*

—Stanley Kunitz

## An Overview and Benefits

Archetypal literary critics think there is a realm of human experience expressed in myths that goes deeper than any rational or intellectual thinking. These critics—we can call them *myth critics* for short—believe the great literature that has proved to be of enduring appeal to humans over the centuries is the literature that best reveals and expresses this magical realm. The job of archetypal criticism is to identify those mythic elements that give a work of literature this deeper resonance.

By their universality, myths seem essential to human culture. They explain the natural world, offer guidance on proper ways to behave in a given society, and offer insight into enduring the inevitable milestones of a lifetime (such as birth, passage into adulthood, marriage, and death). Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of myths is how similar they are in most times and places. Although every society weaves its own distinctive tapestry of myth, we find common threads and patterns—timeless, universal myths that all humans share. Literature uses these common patterns or archetypes. In fact, say myth critics, whenever we are totally caught up in a compelling book, it's usually because of an author's conscious or unconscious use of mythic elements. Common mythical images, symbols, themes, and stories are usually called *archetypes*, a word derived from ancient Greek that means an original pattern. From ancient writers to modern artists (such as the Disney animators who made *The Lion King* or J. K. Rowling who wrote the Harry Potter series), the use of these universal archetypes is a part of our common human and literary ancestry.

We can easily identify many mythic patterns that show up repeatedly in literature, giving it a remarkable unity. We can find archetypal geographies (paradise-like gardens, hellish wastelands, scary forests), archetypal characters (hero warriors, orphans, sorcerers, dark strangers, fisher kings or wounded kings, evil advisers, country bumpkins, scapegoats, earth mothers or fairy protectors, terrible stepmothers, pure heroines, damsels in distress, witches, or sirens), archetypal character conflicts (competing brothers, rebellious children, power-robbing spouses), archetypal story arcs (a stranger comes to town, fish

out of water, opposites attract, mistaken identity, rags to riches), and archetypal themes (good vs. evil, man vs. nature). In other words, there is no shortage of mythic elements to locate in works of literature.

At the heart of them all, however, is the archetype of the *heroic quest*, the mother of all myths. This essential story with all its timeworn elements—a lost paradise, a perilous journey by a hero, the accompaniment by comic sidekicks, the help of a wise old mentor, obstacles and villains to face, a triumph as society is restored to its right order, and a return home—connects a personal journey of self-discovery to a sense of responsibility for making society a better place.

Archetypal criticism has many benefits. It's an approach that gives readers another way to think about and analyze literature. It cultivates a cross-cultural appreciation for a common mythic heritage. And it offers tools for personal discovery. We can use literature's archetypes to think about our own lives in mythic terms as a quest or journey of discovery on which we are embarked. We can consider times we have ventured outside our known realms, undergone initiations, served apprenticeships, received talismanic objects that invest our life with meaning, been tempted to the dark side, experienced transformations, and faced up to our own dragons. Or, we can measure our own modern-day heroes against the archetypal heroic mold. What have been their quests, setbacks, temptations, or victories? Do they fit the archetypal patterns? What do any differences communicate about our present-day society?

In all these ways, archetypal criticism adds value to a reader's tool kit.

## Limitations and Critiques of Archetypal Criticism

One common critique of archetypal criticism is that it doesn't really give us that much to do with a piece of literature—after we identify the mythic elements in a work, then what? Is that all there is?

Another critique is that archetypal criticism tends to try to interpret all literature as another version of the heroic quest story. Isn't literature too varied to be limited to the endless reexpression of this archetype or to be reduced to a few recurring themes?

A final critique is the overemphasis on mythic elements. Aren't we also drawn to great books by their artistry, their philosophical questions, their historical implications, their political stances, their psychological insights, and so forth? Archetypal criticism slights all these attributes of lasting literature.

## To Sum Up

The archetypal or myth critic asks these questions: What mythic elements or archetypal patterns—themes, characters, settings, symbols, imagery, plots, or versions of the hero's

quest—are employed in this literary work? What do they contribute to the work as a whole? Does knowledge of these elements add anything to an understanding of the work? Does the work add anything to an understanding of archetypes? Does the work update old archetypes? Does the work subvert or deconstruct any archetypes?

When reading a work of literature, then, the myth critic examines the form and content of the work, looking for the connection to mythic archetypes that have collected in our human psyches, seeking the inner spirit that gives the work its vitality and enduring appeal.

# Archetypal Criticism for Students: Finding the Mythic Resonance

By Tim Gillespie

*Old myths, old gods, old heroes have never died. They are only sleeping at the bottom of our mind, waiting for our call. We have need for them. They represent the wisdom of our race.*

—Stanley Kunitz

## An Overview and Benefits

The conviction of archetypal literary critics is that there is a realm of human experience expressed in many myths and fantasy stories that goes deeper than any rational or intellectual thinking. These critics—we can call them *myth critics* for short—believe the great literature that has proved to be of enduring appeal to humans over the centuries is the literature that best reveals and expresses this magical realm. The job of archetypal criticism is to identify those mythic elements that give a work of literature this deeper resonance.

By their universality, myths seem essential to human culture. However, many modern folks view myths as mere fables, expressing ancient forms of religion or primitive versions of science. But myths have traditionally served many other crucial cultural functions, not only explaining the natural world but also using stories to present guidance on proper ways to behave in society and offering insight into enduring the inevitable milestones of a lifetime (such as birth, passage through puberty, marriage, and death). Since ancient times, people have invested the most basic transitions and other universal aspects of the human condition with mythic rituals and stories to help them understand and cope. As Joseph Campbell says in his popular book *The Power of Myth*, “[Myths] deal with great human problems. I know what to do when I come to a threshold in my life now. A myth can tell me about it, how to respond to certain crises of disappointment or delight or failure or success. Myths tell me where I am” (1988, 15).

Myths do much of this work at a symbolic and metaphoric level, because the ultimate mysteries of life are not entirely graspable by the intellect alone, say scholars such as Campbell. Myths are thus dramatized representations of the deep instinctual life of people.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of myths is how similar they are across peoples and ages. Although every society weaves its own distinctive tapestry of myth, we discern

common threads and patterns. Even in the myths of cultures widely separated in time and locale, common elements with common meanings recur—symbols, motifs, story arcs, and themes—and elicit similar responses. So that small shiver of recognition we experience when encountering these elements expresses the timeless, universal myths that all humans share.

Literature can cause that shiver. When we become caught up in the atmosphere of a compelling book, say myth critics, it is usually because of the mythic elements.

Because of the powerful draw of myths, some writers say they consciously incorporate mythic elements into their works, while others surely tap that deep vein of meaning unconsciously. Either way, the myth critic believes a literary text's effectiveness to be primarily a function of its mythic resonance.

Archetypal literary criticism took root in the rich soil of other academic fields, most notably cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis. These disciplines may seem far removed from the reading of literature, but this reading approach does have both cultural and psychological dimensions.

On the cultural side, the work of Scotland's Sir James Frazer (1854–1941) set the cornerstone. At Cambridge University, Frazer undertook a massive cross-cultural study of the origins of religion in primitive myth and ritual. Eventually this tome, which Frazer titled *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, stretched to a dozen volumes. Unlike most anthropologists, Frazer, a historian of classics and religion, did not travel to other places to conduct fieldwork; his knowledge of other cultures was secondhand, gleaned from his reading and from questionnaires he sent to missionaries working among “primitive” peoples. Though subsequent scholars consider some of Frazer's descriptions of local myths unreliable, some of his conclusions inaccurate, and some of his attitudes toward other cultures demeaning, *The Golden Bough* is still considered a classic, the first great work of comparative mythology.

Because of his extensive observations of remarkable likenesses in stories and rites of cultures that had never had contact, Frazer's main conclusion was, as he says at the end of *The Golden Bough*, the “essential similarity of man's chief wants everywhere and at all times” (1994, 804). Most societies, for example, have core stories about the death and rebirth of an important god-figure, stories that Frazer says reflect the yearly seasonal pattern of winter's decay and spring's revival. Though the stories and rituals differ in detail from time to place, Frazer notes, in substance they are the same. We spin the same stories our primitive ancestors shared over the tribal fire, only with changed settings and costumes.

*The Golden Bough* made a mark not only on the study of history, mythology, and anthropology but also on literature. Using Frazer as a resource, literary critics began to seek out mythic elements in masterworks of literature at the same time as some prominent writers, including T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and William Butler Yeats, were consciously incorporating mythic elements into their poems and stories. Ever since, we can find popular artists who purposely employ mythic archetypes, including more



recently George Lucas in his *Star Wars* films and the Disney animators who made the *The Lion King*.

It took another great thinker to conceive of the mythic elements in great literature as reflective not only of natural or cultural phenomena, as Sir James Frazer did, but also of deep-seated psychic meanings.

On this psychological side, the work of Carl Jung (1875–1961) offered a substructure for thinking about literature in mythic terms. Jung (pronounced *Yoong*) was a Swiss psychoanalyst and philosopher. Early in his brilliant medical career, he was a disciple of Freud, but Jung’s thinking soon diverged from that of his older mentor. One difference: Jung believed Freud’s conception of the unconscious too limited. Where Freud focused on negative and neurotic behavior, Jung was interested in what he felt was the health-giving potential of the unconscious. And where Freud saw the unconscious as primarily a personal repository of each individual’s repressed desires and emotions, Jung conceived of the unconscious as having two strata. The shallower level, Jung agreed with Freud, is individual and based on one’s unique collection of personal experiences. But Jung saw a deeper, more universal and ancient layer, a “memory” from our distant ancestors, a psychic inheritance common to the whole human race. Jung labeled this the *collective unconscious*. This layer has contents that are more or less the same in all individuals everywhere throughout history, and Jung used a Greek word to describe these contents: *archetypal*. (Archetype is pronounced *ar-ki-type* and is a joining of the Greek prefix *arche-*, beginning, with *typos*, imprint, generally referring to an original pattern on which subsequent representations are based.) Our psychic archetypes are recurring patterns of images, symbols, themes, and stories that help us make sense of our lives. And this mythic level of the unconscious is a source for creativity and health, said Jung.

We can glimpse essential archetypes in dreams and myths, according to Jung. While dreams are personal manifestations of this primeval tribal memory, myths are societal manifestations of it. Myths are not only primitive cultural explanations of the way nature works but also symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche. For example, the ancient Greeks saw the sun’s progress across the sky as the daily ride across the sky of the god Helios in his blindingly bright chariot, for example. However, the story of Helios not only explains the daily solar event but also expresses our unconscious sense of the eternal story—in all its glory *and* tragedy—of the predictable ascendancy and subsequent fading of our shining heroes and of ourselves. For another example, the myth of Arachne explains the origin of spiders as the Greek gods turn the frank and boastful young weaver Arachne into a spider as punishment. However, the story perhaps expresses our unconscious sense of the dangerous web we weave when we are prideful, or, more disconcertingly, when we are honest. Hence, myths are a public expression of our deepest private experiences.

Jung believed that wisdom and good mental health result when humans are in harmony with the archetypes and universal symbols in the collective unconscious. He worried that modern humans, relying too much on science and logic, intellectualizing

and domesticating their more primitive and nonrational natures, might lose contact with something important, might even lose a sense of essential purpose in life.

Literature fits nicely with this thinking about the collective unconscious. Archetypal images occur in rich abundance in literature, which must be seen as its main unconscious appeal. Thus, a novel such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is not only an expression of the author's own individual repressed desires, as Freud might assert, but is even more powerfully, as a Jungian might assert, an archetypal manifestation of forbidden desires for power and violence that the whole human race must repress as a condition of civilization. The archetypal images in Conrad's classic—a journey up a river (shaped like a snake) into a dark, unknown territory of forbidden urges—mimic elements of our common imaginative experience. Myth critics simply seek to find the sources of this powerful appeal of literature.

Thus did the anthropology of Frazer and the psychology of Jung serve as foundation materials for archetypal criticism. But a third scholar, the Canadian Northrop Frye (1912–1991), built the main edifice. Frye decided that the coordinating principle of literature was its grounding in primitive story formulas. Literature, in fact, he declared, is a kind of displaced mythology, and even the most innovative of contemporary literary works reverts to the same patterns we find in old myths, legends, songs, rituals, and folktales. Since all literature arises out of these enduring materials, we can often identify in literature archetypal geographies (edenic gardens or hellish wastelands), character types (heroes, villains, sidekicks, scapegoats), story aspects (journeys as rites of passage, monster-slaying), or themes (good vs. evil, man vs. nature) that give literature its structural unity. Most uniquely, Frye developed a seasonal scheme of archetypal story genres—the *romance* associated with the high point of summer, *tragedy* associated with the fall, bitter *irony* and *satire* associated with bleak winter, and *comedy* associated with spring. Frye's idea is that even the form of literary works expresses a mythic dimension.

Overall, Frye felt that criticism's job was to awaken students to the mythologies behind their literature and thus their societies, freeing them from narrow thinking with a vision of universal truths to live by.

So, what do archetypal or myth critics actually do with a work of literature?

The most basic question of a myth critic is, "What archetypal elements can we find in this literary work? Are there any mythic plots, characters, themes, symbols, or recurring images? How do these archetypal elements contribute to the work as a whole?"

Of course, asking such questions assumes a certain level of knowledge about mythology. Countless books about comparative mythology line the shelves in libraries and bookstores, and plastered all over the Internet are elaborate lists, charts, and diagrams of every conceivable archetype with associated meanings dating back to antiquity.

Some say different colors, numbers, shapes, animals, and plants have archetypal meanings. Archetypal patterns also can be found in natural elements (fire, water, air, earth, the seasons, and heavenly bodies) and natural landscapes (gardens, deserts, oceans, wildernesses, and wastelands). We can find archetypal character types (wise old man,

orphan, warrior, dark stranger, beggar, sorcerer, fisher king or wounded king, king's evil adviser, country bumpkin, good earth mother, terrible stepmother, pure virgin, damsel in distress, witch, femme fatale or siren, and so on), and character conflicts (competing brothers, rebellious children, power-robbing spouses). Or we can find story archetypes. American novelist John Gardner says that all novels are variations on two themes: "A Stranger Comes to Town" or "A Journey Is Taken." The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges once remarked that there were only two main plots in all narrative art, "The Odyssey" and "The Crucifixion." An old high school writing textbook asserted that there are only seven basic stories: "The Fish Out of Water," "Coming of Age," "Opposites Attract," "The Comeuppance," "The King Must Die," "Mistaken Identify," and "Crisis of Belief." The "Man in Conflict" model ascribed to Arthur Quiller-Couch has seven variations: "Man vs. Man," "Man vs. Nature," "Man vs. Himself," "Man vs. God," "Man vs. Society," "Man Caught in the Middle," and "Man and Woman." In his 2005 volume *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker identifies these essential story lines: "Overcoming the Monster," "Rags to Riches," "The Quest," "Voyage and Return," "Comedy," "Tragedy," and "Rebirth." These are all different thinkers' ways of classifying archetypal story patterns.

In other words, there is no shortage of mythic elements to locate in works of literature.

At the heart of them all, however, is the heroic quest archetype, which scholar Joseph Campbell in his 1949 text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* called the "monomyth," or the mother of all myths. Campbell felt that this essential story with all its timeworn elements—a lost paradise, a perilous journey by a hero, the accompaniment by comic sidekicks, the help of a mentor, obstacles and villains to face, a triumph and a return home—conveys important universal truths about the relationship of one's personal journey of self-discovery to one's role in society. Thus, versions of this story are found repeatedly in literature.

Besides identifying variations of all these archetypes in what they read, readers can also examine whether the archetypes change over time. Think of the varying portrayals of King Arthur, for example. Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century stories and their countless reversions have given way to contemporary portrayals, including T. H. White's humanizing 1958 novel *The Once and Future King* (the source for the Disney movie *The Sword in the Stone*), Marion Zimmer Bradley's 1979 feminist retelling from the point of view of Morgan Le Fay in *The Mists of Avalon*, and the hilarious send-up in the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

Some writers actively subvert archetypes for ironic effect. That wily Greek playwright Sophocles, for example, really put a twist in his hero *Oedipus Rex* because Oedipus is *both* the hero *and* the villain of his own story, simultaneously the savior of the city of Thebes, its sacrificial scapegoat, and its doom-bringer.

Another time-honored angle to this literary approach is to bundle various works that express a particular archetype. Focusing on the archetypal idea of a cleansing flood, for example, we can read the story of the Mesopotamian flood in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, refresh our memory of the biblical story of Noah's ark, listen to Bob Dylan's song "A

Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall,” and assess the flood at the end of T. C. Boyle’s contemporary novel *Tortilla Curtain* in light of these older flood stories.

Finally, we can think about our own lives in archetypal terms as a quest or journey of discovery on which we are embarked. In our writing and thinking, we can consider times we have ventured outside our known realms, undergone initiations, served apprenticeships, received talismanic objects that invest our life with meaning, been tempted to the dark side, experienced transformations, and faced up to our own dragons. Or we can measure our own modern-day heroes against the archetypal heroic mold. What have been their quests, setbacks, temptations, or victories? Do they fit the archetypal patterns? What do any differences communicate about our present-day society?

These are some of the applications of archetypal criticism.

## Benefits of Archetypal Criticism

Both the anthropological and the psychological aspects of archetypal criticism have value.

On the anthropological side, studying archetypal criticism reinforces our knowledge of mythology, which scholars such as Joseph Campbell believe is foundational information for any educated person, and gets us thinking about all the essential experiences and wishes we share with other people in other times and places. The essence of the hero’s journey crosses all cultural and temporal barriers, for example, thus illuminating our common humanity.

On the psychological side, studying archetypal criticism gives perspective to our lives, putting our trials and triumphs in the context of a personal heroic journey. Watching mythic or literary heroes struggle, fail, learn, persevere, and experience all possible forms of joy and sorrow is a rehearsal for all that life may bring to us. In other words, studying the mythic roots of literature can be helpful in the endless human quest to find out who we are.

Thus, archetypes, according to their fans, not only take us back to the beginning of humankind’s oldest rituals and beliefs, thus connecting us to others, but also take us deeper into an understanding of our own individual psyches.

## Limitations and Critiques of Archetypal Criticism

During a class discussion of archetypal criticism, a student said, “It’s so demoralizing to have to reduce *everything* you read to one pattern. It makes you think you’ll never read anything new again.”

This comment expresses one critique of archetypal criticism, that to interpret all literature through a few archetypal patterns is reductive. Isn’t literature too varied,

experimental, and explorative an art form to be limited to reexpressions of a few recurring themes? Some writers think the point of literature is to complicate, deconstruct, and resist old imaginative patterns; this critical method seems to deny that innovative or transgressive capacity of art.

In addition, are mythic elements the only magnets in the energy field that draw us to literature? Aren't we also drawn to aesthetic accomplishments, philosophical questions, historical implications, and many other aspects of literature? Archetypal criticism ignores all these other attractions.

## To Sum Up

Archetypal criticism ranges across the fields of mythology, cultural history, and anthropology to gain a feel for the archetypes and images that seem to have the greatest meaning for humans over time.

The archetypal, or myth, critic asks these questions:

What mythic elements or archetypal patterns—themes, characters, settings, symbols, imagery, plots, genres, or versions of the hero's quest—are employed in this literary work? What do they contribute to the work as a whole? Does knowledge of these elements add anything to an understanding of the work? Does the work add anything to an understanding of archetypes? Does the work subvert or deconstruct any archetypes?

When reading a work of literature, then, the myth critic examines the form and content of the work, looking for the connection to mythic archetypes that have collected in our tribal psyche, seeking the inner spirit that gives the work its vitality and enduring appeal.

# Using the Shadow or “Other” Archetype

One of my favorite archetypes to explore with students was suggested to me by my longtime friend and teaching colleague Bill Korach, and that is the idea of “the other” or “the shadow.”

Here’s the handout I share with my students about this archetype:

*He who fights with monsters must take care lest he thereby become a monster.  
And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.*

—FREDERICH NIETZSCHE

Reading Plato’s *Symposium*, we learn that humans once possessed two heads, four arms, and four legs. However, at some juncture, we were split in half by the gods and sentenced to seek out forever our other half in order to complete ourselves. This mythic account finds expression in the idea of the Other, one of the most compelling of all literary and psychological archetypes.

Also known as the double, the alter ego, the doppelgänger, or (by Carl Jung) the shadow, the Other frequently appears in stories of the quest and is a common character in literature of all kinds. Like a shadow, which is a dark, distorted, but ultimately recognizable image of the person who casts it, the Other may at first glance bear little resemblance to the hero. A closer examination, however, reveals that they are intimately related—indeed, inseparable. Sometimes, this relationship is quite literal; the Other may be the hero’s sibling or best friend. However, this is not always the case; the Other may be a complete stranger, even if oddly familiar. Seeing the Other for the first time, the hero may feel that they have met someplace before, though she or he cannot remember where or when. As they get to know each other better, surprising similarities may come to light, even similar names.

The stranger who is uncannily familiar, the enemy who looks so much like the hero that they might be twins, the close friend to whom the central character is inextricably tied despite their totally contrasting personalities—each of these possible identities testifies to the Other’s special nature, to the powerful bond between the protagonists and the inescapable figures who mirror them. Though protagonists may try to break or deny this bond, to disavow any connection to the Other, or even to run away, the reader gradually becomes aware that, in some sense, the two characters cannot exist without each other. Like Felix and Oscar in Neil Simon’s *The Odd Couple*, the two are not mismatched but complementary, each possessing those

traits that his or her opposite lacks. So perfectly do the two members of the pair mesh, in fact, that they sometimes seem less like distinct individuals than two halves of a single human being.

Symbolically, the Other represents precisely that dark, un-lived, and generally unacknowledged part of the central character's personality, kept hidden away from the eyes of the world and often from the protagonist's own awareness. For this reason, Robert Louis Stevenson gives the name "Mr. Hyde" to the character who embodies the violent and lustful impulses, the bestial underside of the seemingly spotless hero, Dr. Jekyll. Often doubles are rejected or despised because, like Mr. Hyde, they are actively evil or immoral, personifications of primitive energies and desires, the untamed urges society trains us to repress, the barbaric drives that lurk beneath and occasionally burst through the orderly and rational surface of our day-to-day lives.

In many instances, the Other represents a more personal form of the unacceptable. As Billy Joel's song "The Stranger" reminds us, "We all have a face that we hide away forever." Protagonists frequently shun, fear, or despise doubles because they are embodiments not only of behavior condemned by society but of fantasies and drives that seem hateful or unsavory to them. These urges may be incompatible with the kind of human beings they imagine themselves to be, with their idealized self-images. The adoring father, for example, who slaves at a soul-crushing job for years, sacrificing his own happiness to give his children a better life, may repress a part of himself that longs to be free of his family, of the restraints and responsibilities they impose on him. The loving daughter who spends her young adulthood taking care of her invalid father may experience rage and hatred that she cannot possibly acknowledge. In stories about the Other, ordinary people often come face-to-face with figures who possess the very characteristics the protagonists have refused to recognize in themselves or from which they have cut themselves off.

Even when the Other is portrayed as repulsive or base, it is important for the hero to come to terms with this figure. Meeting the Other is a crucial event in the hero's journey toward the ultimate goal. Indeed, it is often the first significant stage of the quest after the departure, since the hero cannot proceed along the dangerous path unless she or he is armed with the self-awareness that acceptance of the Other brings. Such acceptance, however, is difficult to achieve; by definition, the Other represents precisely those things that people have the most trouble facing up to in themselves. Only true heroes can look unflinchingly at their Others—who embody everything they find most frightening or repellent in themselves—and admit that what they see is their own mirror image. Nick Carraway recognizes the Gatsby in himself.

Thus, not every story depicts a successful encounter between a protagonist and a double. At times, main characters steadfastly refuse to recognize their own

features in the Other's face, insist to themselves that this distasteful figure has nothing to offer them, and deny that the mysterious bond between them exists. Such individuals remain psychologically stunted, trapped by their fear of what they might discover about themselves within the narrow confines of a rigid self-definition. Such people are also likely to become their own worst enemies. Because they are incapable of accepting the dark sides of their personalities, these characters fall victim to the Other, become possessed by it. We see this happen in our own lives when our inability to admit to an unpleasant emotion—anger, for example—causes it not to disappear but to sink to a level of our minds where it remains hidden, even from our own awareness, but where it grows stronger and stronger until it unexpectedly bursts forth in an inappropriate or destructive way. When this occurs, we sometimes say, “I don't know what came over me,” or, “I wasn't myself,” and at such moments, the stranger inside is temporarily in control. When it is rejected, the Other can easily turn from a potential helper, a figure who holds out the promise of increased self-knowledge and a fuller life, into an adversary.

Possible examples to read and discuss:

- Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's story
- The two William Wilsons in Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson"
- Siddhartha and Govinda in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*
- Jack and Ralph in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*
- The young captain and Leggatt in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*
- Marlow and Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*
- Catherine and Heathcliff in Emily Brönte's *Wuthering Heights*
- Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton in Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*
- Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*
- The narrator and Tyler Durden in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

And, just for fun, a quartet of movie doublings to possibly discuss:

- Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader in *Star Wars*
- Felix Unger and Oscar Madison in *The Odd Couple*
- Danny Glover and Mel Gibson in the *Lethal Weapon* series
- Dirty Harry and the viewer in Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry*



# Story Archetypes

I've collected these archetypal classifications over the years to share with students, though I'm not sure of the source for all of them.

- There is an old dictum among writers, repeated by American novelist and critic John Gardner, that all novels are variations on two themes: “A Stranger Comes to Town” or “A Journey Is Taken.”
- The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges once remarked that there were only two main plots in all narrative art: the Odyssey and the Crucifixion.
- This list was found in an old writing textbook: There are only seven basic stories: The Fish out of Water, Coming of Age, Opposites Attract, The Comeuppance, The King Must Die, Mistaken Identify, and Crisis of Belief.
- A favorite when I was in high school was the “Man in Conflict” model (today, we'd say “Humans in Conflict”), often ascribed to the venerable Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, which has seven variations: Man vs. Man, Man vs. Nature, Man vs. Himself, Man vs. God, Man vs. Society, Man Caught in the Middle, and Man and Woman. (Some versions add Man vs. Technology.)
- In his 2005 volume *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker identifies these essential story lines: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth.

# Genre Criticism for Students: Exploring Classifications and Contexts

By Tim Gillespie

## An Overview

A time-honored way to think about literature is by what is sometimes called genre criticism. Genre (**zhon-ruh**) is that French word that means in this context a *category* of literary composition. Any critic who concentrates on categories of literary form could be called a genre critic.

Think of our human impulse to make meaning in terms of categories. Say some friends ask if we want to go to a movie, and we don't recognize the name of the film they want to see. "What kind of movie is it?" we ask. We are seeking some frame of reference through genre categories: Is it a serious drama, a screwball comedy, an action adventure, a musical, a "chick flick," a noir thriller, a Western, a horror movie, an offbeat indie film, or what? Giving the movie a genre label helps prepare us for what we'll be seeing after we buy our popcorn. Our receptivity is conditioned by our sense of what to expect from the given genre.

This urge for classification fits literature, too. Categorizing by genre seems almost a necessity for starting to read, according to some scholars, who note that effective readers adopt different reading strategies before they start to read, depending on the genre. Our reading pace, focus, attentiveness, use of textual features, and rereading routines are adjusted for different genres. Letters to the editor are read more quickly than long magazine articles, even if they're about the same political issues. We employ different strategies for reading textbook chapters, recipes, text messages, how-to instructions, love letters—and even the different literary genres studied in school.

What are some of these formal literary genres? The ancient Greeks commonly sorted literature—before the novel was invented—into tragic drama, comic drama, epic poetry and lyric poetry. The Dewey Decimal System of 1896, the norm for most libraries in our culture, breaks literature down into the genres of poetry, drama, fiction, essays, speeches, letters, satire and humor writings, and miscellaneous. Canadian scholar Northrop Frye used the broad categories of romance, tragedy, irony, satire, and comedy. As times change and spur new forms of literature to express new conditions and new ways of thinking, new genres arise. Recently, for example, we have seen the science fiction novels of William Gibson and others dealing with new electronic realities dubbed "cyberpunk fiction" and the booming popularity of novels about twenty- to thirty-year-old working women (such as Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*) labeled "chick lit" by some feminist scholars.

In other words, we've been defining and redefining, classifying and reclassifying, and subdividing literature in different ways for centuries, all in the effort to help us get a better handle as readers and writers on the norms and expectations of different forms of text.

Thus, from Greek thinkers 2,000 years ago to the busy hallways of our modern American high school, the study of literature has regularly been organized around genre labels.

## Benefits of Genre Criticism

As Northrop Frye has said, "Putting works of literature in [a genre] context gives them an immense reverberating dimension of significance . . . in which every literary work catches the echoes of all other works of its type in literature, and so ripples out into the rest of literature and thence into life" (1963, 37). Making connections between forms of literature gives us a sense of our connection to writers and people in other times and places.

In addition, some scholars argue that understanding genres is a vital critical reading skill. Knowing the conventions of various genres supports thoughtful reading comprehension, according to this argument. If we have a good sense of how school textbook prose works and in what ways it's radically different from J. K. Rowling's prose, we can adjust our reading strategies and our expectations to each genre of text.

As genre study can support reading, so can it support student writing. Every genre of writing—from thank-you letters to journalistic reporting to college exposition—has its own particular genre conventions. When students study specific aspects of a specific genre, they can then more easily write their own examples.

## Limitations and Critiques of Genre Criticism

Some writers don't trust genre classifications, believing that no author sits down to try to create a work of writing to fit a definition. In fact, most writers want to break definitions, to create something new and innovative that doesn't necessarily fit into any preexisting category. From a serious writer's perspective, making literature is a discipline of imaginative originality, not a paint-by-numbers act. Committed artists strive to invent new forms, often consciously attempting to shatter old genre conventions. (The great jazz musician Duke Ellington said he wanted his music to be "beyond category.") An overemphasis on existing genres can limit writers.

From a reader's perspective, classifying by genre can seem a waste of time. If we are entranced by a great story, who really cares if it's irony or tragedy? We just want to be entertained, enlightened, and moved. Genre categorization can seem the act of fussy scholars with souls of accountants who care more about sorting and classifying than real artistic guts.

Finally, some would argue that genre labels are just a way of controlling and diminishing ideas. Look at the dismissive connotations of the “chick lit” and “cyberpunk” labels mentioned earlier, for example. Shouldn’t works of literature stand on their own rather than be slotted into some category where they are easily disregarded?

As with all critical approaches, genre criticism has its drawbacks as well as its benefits.

## To Sum Up

The main questions of genre critics would be: How might one categorize the genre of this literary text, and what would be the value of doing so? How does it exemplify or explode a conventional genre?

Bottom line: the point of studying literary genres is not merely to sort and classify. The assumption of genre criticism is that we can only thoroughly understand a text if we understand the formal system of which it is a part.

# Genre Criticism for Students: Exploring Classifications and Contexts

By Tim Gillespie

*The purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify . . . bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them.*

—Northrop Frye

*In my opinion, the most significant works of the twentieth century are those that rise beyond the conceptual tyranny of genre; they are, at the same time, poetry, criticism, narrative, drama, etc.*

—Juan Goytisolo

## An Overview

A time-honored way to think about literature is by what is sometimes called genre criticism. Genre (**zhon-ruh**) is that French word that means in this context a *category* of literary composition. Any critic who concentrates on categories of literary form could be called a genre critic.

Think of our human impulse to make meaning in terms of categories. Say some friends ask if we want to go to a movie, and we don't recognize the name of the film they want to see. "What kind of movie is it?" we ask. We are seeking some frame of reference through genre categories: Is it a serious drama, a screwball comedy, an action adventure, a musical, a "chick flick," a noir thriller, a Western, a horror movie, an offbeat indie film, or what? Giving the movie a genre label helps prepare us for what we'll be seeing after we buy our popcorn. Our receptivity is conditioned by our sense of what to expect from the given genre.

This urge for classification fits literature, too. Categorizing by genre seems almost a necessity for starting to read, according to some scholars, who note that effective readers adopt different reading strategies before they start to read—depending on the genre. Our reading pace, focus, attentiveness, use of textual features, and rereading routines are adjusted for different genres. Letters to the editor are read more quickly than long magazine articles, even if they're about the same political issues. We employ different strategies for reading textbook chapters, recipes, text messages, how-to instructions, love letters—and even the different literary genres studied in school.

What are some of these formal literary genres? The ancient Greeks commonly sorted literature—before the novel was invented—into drama (of two types, tragedy and comedy), epic poetry and lyric poetry. Ever since, we’ve been redefining, reclassifying, and subdividing literature in different ways, all in the effort to help us get a better handle as readers and writers on the norms and expectations of different forms of text.

Melvil Dewey’s innovative Dewey Decimal System of 1896, for example, is the norm for most libraries in our culture, breaking literature down into the genres of poetry, drama, fiction, essays, speeches, letters, satire and humor writings, and miscellaneous.

The Oregon State Writing assessment breaks writing into the categories of narrative, descriptive, imaginative, expository, and persuasive.

Canadian scholar Northrop Frye (1912–1991) wrote in his influential book *Anatomy of Criticism* that we best understand literature by sorting it into the broad categories of romance, tragedy, irony, satire, and comedy. Frye’s thinking has been incorporated into the high school curriculum in many places.

As times change and spur new forms of literature to express new conditions and ways of thinking, new genres arise. The novel—that literary genre of the beset individual trying to make his or her way in the world—wouldn’t have been developed in Europe, goes one common theory, without the rise of the middle class with its ideas about individualism. New conditions demanded new genres, so the seventeenth-century European world was ready for something “novel.”

In our time, we can also see the development of innovative new genres of literature. For example, social movements of the 1960s led to “New Journalism,” which appropriated the tools of literary fiction (first-person narration, rich description, use of dramatic scenes) for nonfiction reportage that had traditionally been dryly objective. Writers such as Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, and Hunter S. Thompson skyrocketed onto the scene with this new crossbreed genre that questioned traditional journalistic objectivity as many other social institutions and assumptions were similarly being questioned.

More recently, William Gibson’s novels, particularly *Neuromancer* in 1984, led to the science fiction subgenre of “cyberpunk” because of Gibson’s groundbreaking examination of a world shaken in its old ways by new computer realities. In 2006, for a final example, some feminist scholars noted the booming popularity of novels about twenty- to thirty-year-old single working women (exemplified by Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*) and dubbed this literary movement “chick lit.” Changing circumstances require new genres of expression as old artistic forms and labels prove inadequate.

Thus, from the colonnades where Aristotle walked as he taught his students 2,000 years ago to the busy hallways of our modern American high school, the study of literature has regularly been organized around genre labels.

## Benefits of Genre Criticism

One of the reasons literature grips our imaginations, Northrop Frye argued, is because it is rooted in archetypal genres, those recurring patterns that show up in many cultures, give form to our imaginations, and offer us ways to think about ourselves and the world. As Frye said in his essay “Myth, Fiction, and Displacement,” “Putting works of literature in [a genre] context gives them an immense reverberating dimension of significance . . . in which every literary work catches the echoes of all other works of its type in literature, and so ripples out into the rest of literature and thence into life” (1963, 37). In other words, studying literary genres (since they are universal) can teach us something about human nature in general, about our individual natures in particular, and about how we are connected to other human beings in profound ways.

In addition, some scholars argue that understanding genres is a vital critical reading skill. Knowing the conventions of various genres supports thoughtful reading comprehension, according to this argument. If we have a good sense of how school textbook prose works and in what ways it’s radically different from J. K. Rowling’s prose, we can adjust our reading strategies and our expectations to each genre of text.

As genre study can support reading, so can it support student writing. Heather Lattimer explains this benefit in *Thinking Through Genre*: “The way that a text is put together changes dramatically from genre to genre. Knowledge of these conventions is useful for readers, but it is essential for writers. Students must be taught to analyze the structure of a text, determine the conventions of a genre, and recognize how authors use and adapt these conventions to fit their purposes, so that they may then use this knowledge when crafting their own texts” (2003, 12). In other words, every genre of writing—from thank-you letters to journalistic reporting to college exposition—has its own particular genre conventions or “grammar.” When students study specific aspects of a specific genre, they can then more easily write their own examples.

## Limitations and Critiques of Genre Criticism

One year, during a classroom discussion about genre definitions (what some of the typical elements of a traditional tragedy or a comedy should be, for example), a student almost wriggled out of his seat in annoyance. A serious artist, Chris was blunt: “This is stupid.”

“Why do you think so?” the teacher asked.

“I don’t think that any artist or writer sits down to try to create something to fit a definition,” he said. “Actually, I want to *break* definitions. Art isn’t following someone else’s definitions. Who cares about what’s ‘typical’ or what’s ‘traditional’? I don’t trust all these genre classifications.”

Chris expressed nicely some of the criticisms of a genre approach.

From a serious writer's perspective, making literature is a discipline of imaginative originality, not a paint-by-numbers act. Committed artists strive to invent new forms, often consciously attempting to shatter old genre conventions. (Think of Duke Ellington, who said he wanted his music to be "beyond category.") An overemphasis on existing genres can limit writers.

From a reader's perspective, classifying by genre can seem a waste of time. If we are entranced by a great story, who really cares whether it's a better example of irony or a better example of tragedy? We just want to be entertained, enlightened, provoked, or moved. Genre categorization can seem the act of fussy scholars with hearts of dust and souls of accountants who appear to care more about sorting and classifying than the real artistic guts of the literary matter.

In addition, literary production is so varied, how are we to easily classify a species as slippery as literature? As the German critic Walter Benjamin said in an essay on Proust, "all *great* works of literature establish a genre or dissolve one . . . they are, in other words, special cases" (1999, 237). In other words, the best literature always defies categorization. We may gravitate toward different sections in the bookstore, some preferring to read historical fiction while others prefer tomes of philosophy, detective novels, medieval histories, summer blockbusters, religious texts, or political thrillers. But what's the right shelf for Umberto Eco's masterwork *The Name of the Rose*, which could be classified as all of the above? By this light, genre criticism just narrows our thinking about literature's possibilities.

Finally, there is even a political critique of genre criticism. According to this argument, genres limit our ways of reacting to a work of literature to current social codes and forms of reception; labeling is a way of controlling and diminishing ideas. Look at the dismissive connotations of "chick lit" and "cyberpunk," for example, or the way the label "magic realism" marginalizes the important spiritual and supernatural aspects of fiction from Latin America.

No wonder genre criticism makes some students wriggle in their seats. As with all critical approaches, it has its drawbacks as well as its benefits.

## To Sum Up

Bottom line: the point of studying literary genres is not merely to sort and classify. The assumption of genre criticism is that we can only thoroughly understand a text if we understand the formal system of which it is a part.



# A Collection of Essay Exam Questions About Genre

I generally give end-of-unit essay exams to my students. They usually have five or six questions to choose from; answering two in an hour seems about right. My aspiration for essay exam questions is that the students will find them interesting and thought provoking and that I will find their answers interesting and thought provoking. Good questions lead to original and divergent thinking. The questions below have been tested in my classroom over the years; most generate cogitation.

You may notice that many of the questions ask students to deal with two different texts in their answers. Almost all can be recast slightly so students can address the same issue using just one text.

## General Instructions for Students on Any Essay Exam

- Answer the questions.
- Give ample evidence—plenty of specific examples from works of literature you’ve read—to support your ideas.
- Avoid mere plot summary.

## On Genre in General

1. The German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin, in an essay on French writer Marcel Proust, observed that “all great works of literature establish a genre or dissolve one . . . they are, in other words, special cases” (1999, 237). Discuss the ways two works you have read this year (during our study of genres) either exemplify their genre definitions or shatter them—in other words, if they are “great works” or not, in your opinion, based on Walter Benjamin’s idea of greatness.
2. Pick two works you’ve read this year and discuss how their genre classification has either facilitated or limited your reading and thinking about the works.

## On Romance

1. One of the essential literary genres, a narrative pattern commonly found in literature from all time periods and parts of the world, is the romance or heroic quest story. In what ways do two of the specific works you have read this term (during our unit of study on the romance) express that archetypal tale or in what ways do they work against it?
2. Herman Hesse, author of the novel *Siddhartha*, once said, “The true profession of a [human] is to find a way to himself.” Compare and contrast the ways in which any two of the characters you read about this term are successful in reaching the goal of self-knowledge.

3. Compare and contrast the journeys of any two characters you have read about this term. What moral situations do they face and how do they deal with their dilemmas? What does each character learn?
4. Novelist Gish Jen said in a lecture something like the following: “Going from knowing who you are to not knowing who you are, and trying to get back again—that is the American story.” Discuss two of the works you read in light of this quote.
5. In class one day, a student was questioning how the novel her class was reading (Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal Dreams*) could come to such a nice resolution at the end with loose ends so neatly tied up. “Does reality have such neat, happy endings?” she asked. Discuss the effectiveness of two of the works you read this term in light of this student’s question and those works’ “happy endings.”
6. Romance stories often offer embedded lessons. Discuss two of the works you read this term and the lessons, insights, or wisdom you feel they can offer today’s teenagers.

### **On Tragedy**

1. “Tragedies shouldn’t be ignored. Tragedies as an art form are preparation for life,” said actor Nicolas Cage, after being asked by an interviewer about criticisms that the film *Leaving Las Vegas* (for which Cage won the 1996 Best Actor Academy Award) was too downbeat and ended too darkly for American filmgoers. Discuss the specific ways two of the works we read this term (during our unit of study on tragedy) were “preparation for life.”
2. Pick two of the tragedies you read this term to contrast. Make a case for which you think better fits Aristotle’s definition of an effective tragedy. Make sure to consider all aspects of Aristotle’s ideal: the emotions a tragedy should arouse in an audience, the character of the tragic hero, the notion of a tragic act or flaw, and the elements of the tragic plot.
3. Aristotle said that a tragedy marks “a change from ignorance to knowledge.” Choose two texts you read this term and discuss each in terms of Aristotle’s remark. Consider the change from ignorance to knowledge both of characters in the works and readers. For both, what has been learned?
4. “Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy,” said F. Scott Fitzgerald. An old truism is that in great tragedies the tragic flaw is synonymous with the heroic quality; that is, what makes the hero great is also what brings about the hero’s downfall. Discuss two tragedies you read this term in light of this idea.
5. Discuss a tragic hero you’ve read about this term (for example, Hamlet, Oedipus, Antigone, Creon, Okonkwo, Willy Loman) with a typical romance hero you’ve read about (for example, Sir Gawain, Frodo Baggins, Sumac from the Inca story “Search for the Magic Lake,” Harry Potter). What does each type of hero teach us about aspects of what it means to be a human being, and how do the characters you’re discussing show this?

6. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant said that tragedy's power derives from the fact that it does not present a conflict between right and wrong but between right and right. Discuss two tragedies you read this term in light of this remark.
7. Arthur Miller, author of *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*, wrote, "There is a misconception of tragedy . . . the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism. Even the dictionary says nothing more about the word than that it means a story with a sad or unhappy ending . . . In truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and . . . its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinions of the human animal. For, if it is true to say that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity" (1978, 7). Discuss this quote in relation to two tragedies you read this term.
8. Arthur Miller also has said that whether in modern tragedies of the "common man" or classic tragedies concerning exalted kings and nobles, the tragic flaw is similarly the hero's "unwillingness to remain passive in the face of a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status." The terror and fear traditionally associated with tragedy, says Miller, is the "underlying fear . . . the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world" (1978, 4). Discuss in relation to two tragedies you read this term.
9. In Oscar Wilde's play *Lady Windemere's Fan*, one character famously says, "In the world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants and the other is getting it" (1903, 94). Apply this thought to two tragedies you read.
10. "Greek tragedy was dedicated to man's aspiration . . . to his unending, blind attempt to lift himself above his lusts and his pure animalism into a world where there are other values than pleasure and survival," said Maxwell Anderson in his essay "The Essence of Tragedy" (1939). Discuss two tragedies in light of this comment.
11. The Russian writer Anton Chekov said something to the effect that great art can never be depressing. Demonstrate agreement with this assertion (if you disagree, choose another question) using two tragedies you've read as evidence.
12. Imagine you have been asked to join a panel of teachers, parents, and students to discuss changes to the English curriculum at your school. One of the adults says, "What's the point of reading all those tragedies? I mean, they're all about suicide and murder and incest and other horrible things. What does that teach students? What value is there in reading about all these sad, violent tales?" Argue for keeping tragedy in the curriculum with specific references to two tragedies you've read to back up your point of view.

### **On Irony**

1. Discuss two of the works you read during our unit in terms of their effectiveness as examples of literary irony. Which of the works best expresses this literary genre?

2. Make a distinction between irony and tragedy, using two of the works you have read this year to exemplify, respectively, these two genres and their similarities and differences.
3. Why do you think humans in so many different cultures and in so many different time periods have told themselves stories of irony? So many of these works seem bitter, cynical, and hopeless. So why on earth would people continue telling such stories? What human needs might they serve? Make your case using examples from two works you've read.
4. American writer Henry James remarked, more than a century ago, "Art derives a considerable part of its beneficial exercise from flying in the face of presumptions" (1986, 175). In other words, successful art challenges our comfortable assumptions, the beliefs and attitudes we take for granted or simply presume to be true. Discuss two of the works you read this quarter in terms of this comment. How does ironic literature "fly in the face of our presumptions"?
5. The Anglo-Indian writer Salman Rushdie has said, "One of the things a writer is for is to say the unsayable, to speak the unspeakable, to ask the difficult questions" (2006, 64). Discuss two of the works you read this term in light of the difficult, uncomfortable questions they raise. Which is most successful at speaking what usually isn't spoken?
6. In the group REM's song "What's the Frequency, Kenneth?" there is a line in the lyrics that says, in part, "irony is the shackles of youth." Explain why you agree or disagree with this song lyric about irony. If you agree, in what ways do you think irony might shackle or limit young people? If you disagree, in what ways might irony free or help young people? Make your case using specific examples from two works of ironic literature you've read this term.
7. In his 1996 novel, *A White Merc with Fins*, James Hawes writes, "We are the ironic generation, we can stand back and look down and laugh at it all, like it is some crap-clever ad, but irony is really balls, irony is what you do to stop hurting before it starts, irony is a pre-emptive strike on living" (23). Discuss in light of two works you read this term.

### **On Satire and Comedy**

1. Writer Christopher Hitchens (2005) has said that laughter is a resource against repression and fate. Use this statement to make a distinction between the laughter of satire and the laughter of comedy, using a work of satire you have read and a work of comedy you have read as examples.
2. The great Jonathan Swift penned these words in 1704: "Satire is a sort of glass (mirror), wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own" (1908, lxxv). Use this quote to discuss the differences between satire and comedy, and using examples of each to make your points.
3. In *The Thread of Laughter*, scholar Louis Kronenberger (1952) states that the character of comedy is social, performing a positive social function in that it makes

- us more critical but leaves us more tolerant. Discuss this idea using any two comic works you read this term during our unit of study on comedy.
4. Choose two comedies you read this term and discuss in what specific ways those works offer some perspective on life and the human condition.
  5. Walter Kerr, in his book *Tragedy and Comedy*, says, “Comedy is a groan made merry. Laughter is not man’s first impulse; he cries first. Comedy always comes second” (1967, 19). Many thinkers have remarked on this complex interrelationship. Mark Twain wrote in *Following the Equator* that “the secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow” (1897, 119). Kurt Vonnegut said, “Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterward” (1981, 328). Discuss this idea of the relation of comedy and anguish using two comic works you’ve read as evidence.
  6. The American writer Flannery O’Connor once said, “All comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death” (1962, 5). Use two comic works you read to demonstrate this comment’s truth and talk about why it is important that this be so.
  7. Comedienne, writer, and director Elaine May once said, “A romance means something that can’t happen; a comedy means something that can.” Discuss this comment in light of two comic works you’ve read.
  8. George Meredith once said, “The true test of comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter.” Choose two comic works you read that awakened your “thoughtful laughter.” Discuss in what ways they are funny and in what ways they provoke thought, and how these two aspects are integrally related.
  9. Horace Walpole said, “Life is a comedy for those who think, a tragedy for those who feel.” Discuss this puzzling, well-known adage in terms of a comedy and a tragedy you have read.
  10. Robert W. Corrigan, in his book *Comedy: Meaning and Form* wrote, “The constant in comedy is the comic view of life . . . the sense that no matter how many times man is knocked down, he somehow manages to pull himself up and keep on going. Thus, while tragedy is a celebration of man’s capacity to aspire and suffer, comedy celebrates his capacity to endure” (1965, 3). Discuss this comment in terms of a comedy and a tragedy you have read.

### **Year-End Questions**

1. The American theater director Anne Bogart has said, “Inside every good play lies a question.” One might say the same about all great pieces of literature. Writer David Guterson has added, “The only questions worth asking are the ones that can’t be answered.” Pick two of the literary works you read this year, identify in turn the question that you see at their hearts, talk about why you think those questions are worth asking, and discuss some of the ways the works deal with their core questions.

2. Discuss the differences between a romantic hero, a tragic hero, an ironic hero and a comic hero, using characters from works you have read this year in your discussion. Explain what different human needs you see being satisfied by these different kinds of heroes.
3. Choose a character from any work of fiction you read this year. In first person, write a high school graduation speech as it might be delivered by that character. Show how well you know the character when you adopt this persona. What advice might that character offer to young adults beginning a new phase in their lives? What issue would that character be most interested in and what life lessons would that character use to demonstrate his or her points?
4. In his poem “Little Gidding” from *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot (1971) writes:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

Discuss how Northrop Frye’s sequence of literary works exemplifies the idea expressed in this poem. Use plentiful references to specific texts you’ve read this year in your answer.

# An Extra Modern Genre: Magic Realism

Catercorner in my classroom, two groups are discussing two novels. The sixteen senior English students window-side are chatting up Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. The fifteen students by the door are jawing about Louise Erdrich's *Bingo Palace*. The classroom is not huge, so the backs of one group are almost touching the backs of the other, and talk rebounds between.

I sit in on each group to eavesdrop. In the *Song of Solomon* group, one of the discussion topics is whether people in the novel really can fly or whether Morrison is just using flight as a metaphor. The protagonist of the novel, Milkman Dead, has had his ears filled with African American folktales about people flying, but he has to wrestle with the possibility because of his skeptical twentieth-century American perspective—just as my students do from their similar twenty-first-century perspective. So does Milkman really fly off at the end of the novel or not? Morrison's answer is enigmatic, but the students talk comfortably about this ambiguity and the other magical elements Morrison brings to her novel.

At the other corner of the room, the *Bingo Palace* group is struggling with the supernatural aspects of Erdrich's novel. The realists have a spokesperson in Keegan: "I just can't buy any of this magic stuff," he says. "It takes away from the believability of the story. I mean, this is *today*, and it just doesn't seem real to have ghosts running around on the Ojibwa reservation stealing cars and giving advice on how to win bingo games."

"I really like that aspect," says Christina. "It's the world of the people there."

"You didn't gripe about the ghost in *Hamlet*, as I recall," I say to Keegan.

"No, but people back then believed in ghosts," he says.

"Well, some do today," said Vanessa. "That's like saying you can't enjoy *Harry Potter* because sorcery isn't real."

"But that's a fantasy world," said Keenan. "This is mostly a real, everyday, kind of nitty-gritty believable world. Because of all the ghosts and stuff, it's hard to know where you are as a reader."

This conversation, which continued for a while, shed light on one more recent genre that I've particularly enjoyed chewing over with my students: magic realism.

*Magic realism* is the label that has come to be commonly applied the last half-century to literature in which magical elements are an accepted part of a realistic setting and the marvelous is melded with the ordinary.

In a fictional work of magic realism such as *Song of Solomon* or *Bingo Palace*, the characters live in a world in which magic and supernatural events occur and are not questioned. No particular attempt is made by the author to explain or rationalize the fantastic elements to the reader. Time may be distorted from its normal linear unfolding, cause and effect may be flipped upside-down, people may fly, ghosts may appear, inanimate objects may move, people may spontaneously combust, butterflies may grow from blood,

magic transformations may occur. But these supernatural happenings are taken for granted. Magic simply exists comfortably side by side with the mundane, everyday world.

These stories thus often have the quality of folktales but with a grittier substructure. And though we don't as young readers or listeners question that a giant beanstalk can lead young Jack to an ogre's castle hidden behind the clouds in the sky or that the Japanese hero-boy Momotaro can be born from a peach, we may react quite differently when we encounter such events in a contemporary adult novel—as Keegan did. We may feel disturbed when fantastical elements exist in juxtaposition to a realistic, recognizable modern world, wondering how to best interpret the tale: Is this world to be taken literally, metaphorically, symbolically? How are we modern commonsensical readers supposed to react when the supernatural invades the natural in a book we're reading? These are animating questions for students.

The term *magic realism* has been most often associated with the boom in Latin American literature after World War II, when writers from the Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias to the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez (both Nobel Prize Laureates, by the way) stirred together everyday realities with fantastic occurrences, a brew inspired by the rich Latin American cultural mix of indigenous peoples, Hispano-European conquerors, African slaves, and their intermixed progeny: old world and new, traditional and modern. In the effort to make sense of the reality of the conquered alongside that of the conquerors, these writers cooked up a new postcolonial literary tradition that has contemporary social relevance spiced with aspects of native fable and folk tale. (Archetypal critics, of course, would see this as simply another example demonstrating their assertion of the intoxicating effects of underlying mythic elements in literature.)

Because magic realist works often adopt the viewpoint of conquered cultures, many of them have an embedded social critique. Skeptical modern readers, inheritors of an objective and scientific worldview, are given a chance to see through the eyes of people who experience a world in which the supernatural cohabits with the natural, thus being reintroduced to a sense of wonder, awe, mystery, and strangeness about the cosmos. At the same time, these works often offer a vision of oppressed people breaking the chains of our modern condition: flying away from bonds, escaping prison with the help of ghosts, freeing themselves by the employment of native ways of seeing reality. Thus, these stories are often assertions of the lasting power of oppressed people's worldviews. Magic realism thus gives fantasy a harder edge and greater social realism than in most traditional fantasy literature.

Though magic realism is most often associated with Latin American writers, its use has been widespread among writers from all corners of the globe, including such luminaries as Günter Grass of Germany, Haruki Murakami of Japan, Salman Rushdie of India, and José Saramago of Portugal.

Some have speculated that U.S. writers are incapable of writing magic realism because we are such a pragmatic, materialistic society. This assertion is undercut by richly fantastic works by plenty of novelists besides Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich. (See lists that follow.)



## **A Few Recommendations: Works of Magic Realism That Students of Mine Have Fruitfully Read**

### **Latin American Writers**

- Allende, Isabel (Chile and the United States), *The House of Spirits*
- Esquivel, Laura (Mexico), *Like Water for Chocolate*
- Márquez, Gabriel García (Colombia): *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”

### **U.S. Writers**

- Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues*
- Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me Ultima*
- W. P. Kinsella, *Shoeless Joe* (made into the film *Field of Dreams*)
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, *Sula*
- Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*
- Lawrence Thornton, *Imagining Argentina*

# Moral Criticism for Students: Probing the Moral and Ethical Dimensions of Literature

By Tim Gillespie

## An Overview and Benefits

From ancient times to today, humans have considered the cultivation of positive morals to be one of literature's primary purposes.

The ancient Greek storyteller Aesop wrote fables with direct moral lessons tacked on to the end. The Roman poet Horace said that literature should combine “the sweet and the useful,” mixing pleasure at reading with moral instruction. A best-selling recent American book, William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, promoted the idea that literature is to be judged by its capacity to instruct, to inspire, and to promote positive moral values.

However, the way literature interacts with moral values is not always so simple as an explicit Aesop's fable moral. Literature is an *experiential* art form, dramatizing complex moral dilemmas so readers virtually *experience* the moral quandary of a protagonist: Which should Antigone obey—the authority of her uncle King Creon or the dictates of her own religious conscience? Should Huck Finn give up his friend Jim as his slave-owning society demands or shelter Jim and risk what he has been told will be eternal damnation? A moral approach acknowledges the centrality of this kind of moral problem-posing in literature. We often call the central moral questions at issue in a piece of literature its *themes*.

Readers can fruitfully interrogate a text from this point of view: What are the moral and ethical issues being explored in this text—the work's main themes—and how thoroughly, fairly, and realistically are they presented? What are the lessons being taught? Do these moral issues connect with our lives?

This perspective is a time-honored belief about a writer's primary responsibility: to provoke moral thought and promote positive moral values in readers. Thinking about literature in such terms gives us a chance to think about what it means to be a moral human being.

## Limitations and Critiques of Moral Criticism

Plenty of critics point to dangers inherent in applying moral values to the evaluation of literature.

One danger is the application of this simplistic formula: works of literature that portray positive morals are good and works that don't are bad. The Italian poet Dante (1265–1321), for example, believed that reading about forbidden love like that between Lancelot and Guinevere in the tales of King Arthur would lead to immoral behavior and that a poet's job was to capture the image of model figures in action rather than sinners. And the Puritans in Elizabethan England, constantly pressing to shut down the theaters, seemed convinced that playgoers viewing the sight of evildoing on stage would be compelled in response to go out into the reeking streets of London and commit some more.

Unfortunately, as with the Puritans, this often leads to censorship. Even in contemporary America today, the American Library Association notes that some of our most famous literary works—*Huck Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Brave New World*, *Native Son*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*—have been challenged on moral grounds, leading many folks to equate moral criticism with censorship.

Another critique of a moral approach is that it too often promotes preachy or *didactic* literature that hammers a reader over the head with its moral lesson. At its extreme, as with dictators such as Hitler who adopted a strenuously “moral” point of view about books, preachy art becomes propaganda.

In these and other ways, moral criticism has been challenged.

## An Issue to Consider: Moral Judgments of Literary Art

So how might we assess the value of a work of literature on moral terms?

One moral standard is to look at the overall presentation of complex moral dilemmas and consequences. Any story that has a solution that is too neatly tied up or a plot that is too clichéd risks oversimplifying the complexity of acting morally in the world. We can ask: Is the story so predictable that nothing is learned? Is the story so stuck in its good-guy vs. bad-guy rut that we can easily dismiss the evil and not see part of ourselves in the bad guy? Do all points of view and characters on different sides of an issue get a fair voice?

A second and related standard for thinking about the moral value of a story is to consider its portrayal of fictional characters. Way back in 1821, English poet Percy Shelley praised the way literature cultivates our *moral imagination*, our ability to make a good faith effort to understand or even inhabit the viewpoint of someone unlike us, to put ourselves into their shoes and see them as they might see themselves. So as we read Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, we gain an empathic identification with the poor and downtrodden through our moral imagination.

One of the deepest pleasures and values of reading fiction is this opportunity to “be” someone else for a while. The protagonist of a novel or play that captures us may be a different gender, race, social class, age, sexual orientation, religion, or nationality than we are, and from a place we’ve never been and a time period we’ve never experienced. But by the power of the human imagination—of both writer and reader—the story can help us escape the boundaries of our own narrow circumstances, plunge us into another world and consciousness, and cultivate the healthy exercise of identification. We get to experience another’s dilemma. We recognize unmistakable aspects of ourselves staring back at us from the portrait of a stranger. The story makes us more tolerant of differences while simultaneously confirming our common humanity.

From this point of view, then, one way to judge the moral quality of a work of fiction is to assess how accurately and fully it portrays characters, because we can’t learn to inhabit others’ perspectives if the characters in books are mere stereotypes.

## To Sum Up

A moral perspective can offer readers many critical questions: Does a work enlarge our moral imagination? Has the author presented a moral dilemma with all its contradictions and complexities? Are characters complicated and fully dimensional? Has the writer avoided stereotypes? Does the work help us to understand others more deeply and to connect with people and perspectives, places and times unlike our own?

With such questions readers can explore literature’s moral dimensions.

# Moral Criticism for Students: Probing the Moral and Ethical Dimensions of Literature

By Tim Gillespie

*The highest purpose of the writer is to create beauty indivisible from morality.*  
—Bernard Malamud

## An Overview

From ancient times to today, humans have considered the cultivation of positive morals to be one of literature's primary purposes.

The ancient Greek storyteller Aesop wrote fables with direct moral lessons tacked on to the end. The Roman poet Horace said that literature should combine “the sweet and the useful,” mixing pleasure at reading with moral instruction. A best-selling recent American book, William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, promoted the idea that literature is to be judged by its capacity to instruct, to inspire, and to promote positive moral values.

However, the way literature interacts with moral values is not always so simple as an explicit Aesop's fable moral. Literature is more of an *experiential* art form than a preachy one. Authors *dramatize* moral dilemmas so readers virtually *experience* the moral quandary of a protagonist, perhaps even waver and feel the temptation of an evil act or understand in a marrowbone the claims of competing values. Through literature we can see dramatized variations of questions with which humans have struggled for centuries: What is honorable behavior, particularly in complex and ambiguous situations? How is justice achieved? Why does evil exist, and how do we face it? How does a relationship with a god interact with matters of good and evil? How do we resolve differences between our personal values and our society's mores, especially when they clash? How does altruism interact with self-interest? How do we experience love in respectful and ethical ways? What is our responsibility to our tribe, and how large is our tribe? These are universal moral questions whose answers are played out in different ways in different cultures and times but whose asking is a characteristic of much serious literature.

Thinkers in this tradition will assert that the way the exploration of these questions is conducted in a work must be the measure of its ultimate value. From this point of

view, then, what matters most about *The Scarlet Letter* is not its writing style but the effectiveness of its moral exploration of the costs of unconfessed sin on a human soul.

This perspective is a time-honored belief about what literature should do and what a writer's primary responsibility is: to provoke moral thought and promote positive moral values in readers.

## Benefits of Moral Criticism

Throughout the history of writing, narrative art has been engaged in presenting complex moral dilemmas. Or, as American writer Robert Stone has expressed it, "I believe that it is impossible for any novelist to find a subject other than the transitory nature of moral perception. The most important thing about people is the difficulty they have in identifying and acting upon what's right" (1988, 75).

Which should Antigone obey—the authority of her uncle King Creon or the dictates of her own religious conscience? Should Huck Finn give up his friend Jim as his slave-owning society demands or shelter Jim and risk what he has been told will be eternal damnation?

A moral approach acknowledges the centrality of this kind of moral problem-posing in literature. In fact, we often call the central moral questions at issue in a piece of literature its *themes*.

Readers can fruitfully interrogate a text from this point of view: Has the author met the obligation to explore moral issues? What are the moral and ethical issues being explored in this text; that is, what are the work's main themes—and how thoroughly, fairly, and realistically are they presented? What are the lessons being taught, explicitly or otherwise? Do these moral dilemmas have any resonance in our own lives?

Thinking about literature in such terms gives us a chance to think about what it means to be a moral human being.

## Limitations and Critiques of Moral Criticism

Plenty of critics point to dangers inherent in applying moral values to the evaluation of literature.

One danger is the application of this simplistic formula: works of literature that portray positive morals are good and works that don't are bad.

This is a long-standing attitude. The Italian poet Dante (1265–1321), for example, believed that reading about forbidden love like that between Lancelot and Guinevere in the tales of King Arthur would lead to immoral behavior and that a poet's job was to capture the image of model figures in action rather than sinners. The Puritans in

Elizabethan England, constantly pressing to shut down the theaters, seemed convinced that playgoers viewing the sight of evil-doing on stage would be compelled in response to go out into the reeking streets of London and commit some more.

This idea that literature is moral and good if it portrays morally correct behavior and immoral and bad if it portrays morally corrupt behavior has thus been with us a long time. We see censors from antiquity to our own time attempting to ban what they see as “immoral” texts. The American Library Association’s list of the 100 most frequently challenged library books includes long-standing classics (*Huck Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Brave New World*, *Native Son*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*), a rich collection of Nobel Prize winners’ novels (John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, and numerous works by Toni Morrison), popular American works of the last fifty years (*Catcher in the Rye*, *The Color Purple*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*), and an extensive list of well-known books for younger readers (*Bridge to Terabithia*, *The Chocolate War*, *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, *Flowers for Algernon*, *The Giver*, the Goosebumps series, *James and the Giant Peach*, *Julie of the Wolves*, *A Light in the Attic*, *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, *The Outsiders*, *The Pigman*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, most books in the Harry Potter series, and, perhaps most inexplicably of all, *Where’s Waldo?*). Most of these books are challenged on moral grounds, leading many folks to equate moral criticism with censorship.

Besides this censoring impulse, a second critique of a moral approach is that it too often promotes preachy literature. The word that is traditionally used to characterize such work is *didactic*, taken from the Greek “to teach.” In contemporary usage, didacticism is most often used to describe literature that hammers a reader over the head with its moral lesson. Such lecturing is merely annoying to some readers, but others feel it can lead to artistic phoniness, such as novelist Stephen Crane, who said, “Preaching is fatal to art in literature.”

At its extreme, didactic art can be downright damaging. Dictators often adopt a strenuously “moral” point of view about literature. From Hitler to Stalin to the ayatollahs who condemned English writer Salman Rushdie to death for blasphemy, authoritarians are quick to label anything they don’t like as “immoral” and to alter, censor, ban, or destroy it. The art produced in Third Reich Germany expressed that regime’s “moral” values; much of it was nationalistic, Nazi-serving, anti-Semitic, and sentimental junk. This is preachy art at its worst, and we have a common name for it: propaganda.

In these and other ways, moral criticism has been challenged.

## **An Issue to Consider: Moral Judgments of Literary Art**

So how might we assess the value of a work of literature on moral terms?

There’s a long-standing notion that art should present only exemplary behavior so as not to lower the moral standards of those who see it. The sympathy of an audience

should never be roused for wrongdoing, according to this viewpoint, so a work of writing should not portray evil as attractive or without consequence. Noble people should act nobly and be rewarded for it, and evildoers should be punished.

However, most lasting literature is far more complex. Heroes in our most durable texts—Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Greek tragedies, the tales of the noble knights of King Arthur’s round table—often have serious flaws, moments of moral failing, and temptations to which they succumb. Even the Old and New Testaments of the Bible show great heroes and leaders at times acting despicably—Jacob deceiving his father, Solomon practicing idolatry, Peter lying and denying his relationship with Jesus, and King David, as one religious student said, “breaking almost all Ten Commandments single-handedly”—but few would call the Bible immoral. Likewise, much literature seems more committed to presenting moral complexity rather than moral certainty. Therefore, judging a work of writing on moral grounds is usually not so simple a matter as judging the isolated moral behaviors of characters.

So, what other standards might we use to judge literary works from a moral point of view? Let’s look at two intriguing moral standards that different thinkers have proposed, the first having to do with the overall presentation of a text and the second having to do with fictional characters.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle offered some insights into the first standard. He said we can’t judge a play on single events or behaviors within it but must look at the context of the whole work for how it dramatically *demonstrates* complex moral dilemmas and consequences. Moral decisions are often made in difficult, complicated, and ambiguous circumstances. One of literature’s strengths is the way it can present for the examination of readers knotty moral situations and the way fictional characters deal with them, thus becoming a sort of laboratory for ethical experimentation. But the experiment has to be fairly rendered. Any story that has a solution that is too easy and neatly tied up, an argument that is too one sided or didactic, or a plot that is too clichéd risks oversimplifying the complexity of acting morally in the world.

Contemporary American novelist and essayist Annie Dillard discusses sentimentality in moral terms in her 1982 book *Living by Fiction*. Bad writing, Dillard says, attempts to force stock emotions on us. For example, creating a fiction about a beloved teenage character who inexplicably gets a terminal disease is a sure way for a writer to elicit emotion; the death of a youth is one of life’s saddest events. But just penning such a tear-jerking story does not mean that a writer is teaching us anything. Dillard says that for a writer’s interpretations of the world to be as valuable as possible, the writer must include more of life’s moral complications. If the dying teenager acts selfishly or angrily about her situation and tries the patience of others or alienates them in her honesty, or if her best friend cannot deal with mortality and never comes to see her, or if her boyfriend in his confusion cheats on her, or if the dying teenager’s father cannot cope and abandons his family, then we are being asked to confront life in its full moral complexity. Narratives with solutions that are too tidy, outcomes too predictable, and plots too stereotyped do not meet these standards. Sentimental plots oversimplify life’s complex moral demands.



In addition, well-regarded novels are often multivocal, allowing us access to the visions of many characters. Ambitious novelists—from Charles Dickens in his social novels through William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* to more contemporary authors such as Barbara Kingsolver in *Poisonwood Bible*, and Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club*—are in the habit of presenting multiple voices, working to portray situations from many viewpoints. In most of these works, readers are asked to understand situations from different characters' perspectives. No position is silenced or dehumanized. This does not mean that great artists don't take moral positions. Rather, it means that great texts often suspend our judgments during the course of the work by presenting many options. Readers are thereby forced to consider and reconsider how to apply values in the most complex of ethical situations. Great literature can expand the moral range of readers by its openness to multiple perspectives.

So one standard for judging literature on a moral basis is to assess the overall presentation. We can ask: Is the story so predictable, clichéd, or sentimental that nothing can be learned? Is the story so stuck in its good-guy vs. bad-guy rut that we can easily dismiss and externalize the evil, so cut-and-dried that we can't ever see part of ourselves in the bad guy? Do all points of view and characters on different sides get a fair voice? These are the kinds of questions moral criticism can raise.

A second and somewhat related standard for thinking about the moral value of a story is to consider its portrayal of fictional characters and our capacity to empathize with them.

In his 1821 *A Defence of Poetry*, English poet Percy Shelley proposed the idea that imagination is the well-spring of compassion: "A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination" (1904, 34). Such a moral imagination is our ability to try to understand another, to make a good faith effort to inhabit another's viewpoint—even someone quite unlike us. This idea of putting ourselves empathetically into others' shoes, of trying to see others as they might see themselves, is at the heart of many of the world's great ethical formulations, such as the biblical Golden Rule. Literature, Shelley believed, offers us a particularly rich chance to practice that moral projection.

This idea of the cultivation of an empathetic imagination has plenty of contemporary champions. One is Harvard professor, psychiatrist, and prize-winning writer Robert Coles, as particularly expressed in his wonderful 1990 book *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. For years Coles taught the most popular undergraduate course at Harvard, the Literature of Social Reflection, as well as courses on ethics at Harvard's medical, law, education, and business schools. Based on his belief that we learn our most lasting moral lessons through stories, Coles made works of literature the center of his curriculum in all these classes. Stories give us insight not only into our own moral struggles and questions, Coles said, they also ask us to enter the lives of others. In like fashion, American philosopher Martha Nussbaum from the University of Chicago teaches

a course called Law and Literature at the University of Chicago Law School, having her students—future attorneys, judges, and corporate and civic leaders—read novels to gain empathy for other humans: for the poor and downtrodden through Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, for homosexuals through E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, for racial minorities through Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

From this point of view, then, one way to judge the moral quality of a work of fiction is to assess the extent to which it welcomes readers to empathize with its characters—and how accurately and fully it portrays those characters, because we can't learn to inhabit others' perspectives if the characters in books aren't complicated “real people” but are mere symbols, stereotypes, or foils.

Or, as Ernest Hemingway said, a writer's responsibility is to know his characters so well he could tell what they'd carry in their pockets. To reach greatness, writers must make the effort to see into other people's pockets and minds—even people unlike them, even people they dislike. They must go so far as to exercise the bravest act of moral imagination—to imagine what circumstances might make them behave as their enemies behave. The attempt to understand characters who commit despicable acts—F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, for example, or Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita*, or Cholly Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*—may stretch our sympathies to the breaking point, but is a characteristic of some of the greatest writers. Denying the existence of evil in sympathetic characters makes it harder to address evil as it actually occurs in the world. People are, after all, full of contradictions. Bad people do good things and good people do bad things. All of us have flaws, sometimes fatal ones. All of us act sometimes as we know we shouldn't. Rich literature acknowledges these hard truths.

The American philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007) came at this idea from a different angle. Human evil and cruelty, Rorty says, grow like a cancer from generalized descriptions that cast “others” as something different and less complicated than “us.” Poets and novelists, he says, help us see others in their unique, singular individuality rather than as members of some undifferentiated group of weird others. A lack of curiosity about others makes it easier for us to humiliate them, but great writers pique our curiosity and draw us closer to others. They offer concrete details and sharply etched images of human suffering that make it impossible for us to look away. In all these ways, literary artists are essential for moral progress.

Here is where moral criticism intersects with one of the deepest pleasures and values of reading fiction—the chance to be someone else for a while. The protagonist of a novel or story or play that captures us may be a different gender, race, social class, age, sexual orientation, religion, or nationality than we are, and from a place we've never been and a time period we've never experienced. But by the power of the human imagination—of both writer and reader—the story can help us escape the boundaries of our own narrow circumstances, plunge us into another world and consciousness, and cultivate the healthy exercise of identification. We get to have an intimate experience with a stranger. We

get to experience another's dilemma. We recognize unmistakable aspects of ourselves staring back at us from the portrait of a stranger. The compelling story thus makes us more tolerant of differences while simultaneously confirming our common humanity.

In sum, moral criticism can do more than mere tut-tutting about the literary portrayal of bad acts. Its critical standards invite us to ask whether the world created by a writer is as complicated and multidimensional as our actual world, and if the characters created by a writer are as complex and uncategorizable as real people. It recognizes a connection between moral judgments about literature and a moral life. As bad writing is characterized by shallow representations and stereotyped characters, bad behavior is characterized by shallow treatment and stereotyping of others. By such insights does moral criticism seek to make readers both more discerning thinkers and more responsible citizens.

## To Sum Up

A moral perspective can offer readers critical questions and directions beyond the merely censorious or preachy: Does a work enlarge our moral imagination? Has the author given the full context for a moral dilemma, presenting a story in its full scope with all its contradictions and complexities? Are characters treated fairly? Are they complicated and fully dimensional? Has the writer avoided stereotypes? Does the work help us to understand others more deeply, to connect with people and perspectives, places and times unlike our own? In helping us lose ourselves in another's story, does the work help us find ourselves?

With such questions, readers and critics can confront the moral dimensions of literature.

# A Booklist of Classroom-Tested Texts That Raise Complex Moral Issues

## Short Stories

- Stephen Crane, “The Blue Hotel”
- William Faulkner, “Barn Burning”
- Sarah Orne Jewett, “A White Heron”
- Ursula K. LeGuin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”
- Grace Paley, “Samuel”
- Leo Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”
- Mark Twain, “The Story of the Good Little Boy,” “The Story of the Bad Little Boy,” “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg”
- William Carlos Williams, “The Use of Force”

## Essays

- George Orwell, “A Hanging,” “Shooting an Elephant”

## Novels or Novellas

- Albert Camus, *The Stranger*
- Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*
- John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

## Plays

- Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*

# A Collection of Quotes to Further Stimulate Discussion and Writing About Moral Criticism

*The task for art to accomplish is to make that feeling of brotherhood and love of one's neighbor . . . the customary feeling and the instinct of all men.*

—Leo Tolstoy

*My writing is about difference. My writing is about how do we learn to lie down with the different parts of ourselves, so that we can in fact learn to respect and honor the different parts of each other.*

—Audre Lorde

*We can link loss of moral faith to a loss of faith in storytelling.*

—John Domini

*. . . literature can help students come to terms with love, and life, and death, and mistakes, and victories, and pettiness, and nobility of spirit, and the million other things that make us human and fill our lives.*

—Bruce Flemming

*Everyone teaches in every work of art. In almost everything you do, you teach, whether you are aware of it or not. Some people aren't aware of what they're teaching. They should be wiser.*

—George Lucas

*The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures.*

—George Eliot

*Stories, after all, are a gift. Unless we're willing to imagine what it might feel like inside another skin, then we are imprisoned in our own.*

—John Edgar Wideman

*It is often said that one has but one life to live, but that is nonsense. For one who reads, there is no limit to the number of lives that may be lived.*

—Louis L'Amour

*To know anything about oneself one must know all about others.*

—Oscar Wilde

*It's the duty of both writers and readers to imagine the inner experiences of the other... without that imagining there can be no contact, and no communion.*

—Madison Smartt Bell

*. . . the foremost gift from stories is “experience of other.” For the duration of a story, children may sense how it is to be old, and the elderly may recall how it is to be young; men may try on the experiences of women, and women those of men. Through stories, we reach across the rifts not only of gender and age, but also of race and creed, geography and class, even the rifts between species or between enemies . . . “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” Thoreau asks. We come nearer to achieving that miracle in stories than anywhere else.*

—Scott Russell Sanders

*Whitman’s morality is . . . the kind that doesn’t hate outsiders and extends the surfaces of the skin to include everyone.*

—Robert Bly

*Climbing into a stranger’s skin is the core of the writer’s experience, stretching the imagination to incorporate the unimagined. Freeing? It is both exhilarating and terrifying, and no good writing happens without that first step outside the bounds of one’s own narrow perspective.*

—Dorothy Allison

*A society in crisis teaches itself to congeal into one story only and sees reality through very narrow glasses. But there is never only one story.*

—David Grossman

*I know what madness is. It’s not knowing how another man feels . . . A madman’s never been in another man’s shoes.*

—The 1969 musical “Promenade

*If the practice of fiction is inextricably linked with concerns of morality, what is there to say about the writer’s responsibility? The writer’s responsibility, it seems to me, consists in writing well and truly . . . The writer who betrays his calling for commercial or political reasons vulgarizes his own perception and his rendering of it . . . It must be emphasized that the moral imperative of fiction provides no excuse for smug moralizing, religiosity, or propaganda. On the contrary, it forbids them. Nor does it require that every writer equip his work with some edifying message advertising progress, brotherhood, and light.*

—Robert Stone

*I believe that imagining the other is a powerful antidote to fanaticism and hatred. It is, in my view, also a major moral imperative.*

—Amos Oz

*The writers, I do believe, who get the best and most lasting response from readers are the writers who offer a happy ending through moral development. By a happy ending, I do not mean mere fortunate events—a marriage or a last-minute rescue from death—but some kind of spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation, even with the self, even at death.*

—Fay Weldon

*A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest proper models of human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie.*

—Tim O'Brien

*Making up a scene, [the writer] asks himself at every step, "Would she really say that?" or "Would he really throw the shoe?" He plays the scene through in his imagination, taking all the parts, being absolutely fair to everyone involved, (mimicking each in turn . . . and never sinking to stereotype for even the most minor characters), and when he finishes the scene he understands by sympathetic imitation what each character has done throughout and why the fight, or accident, or whatever, developed as it did . . . that close scrutiny of how people act and speak, why people feel precisely the things they do, how weather affects us at particular times, how we respond to some people in ways we would never respond to others, leads to knowledge, sensitivity, and compassion.*

—John Gardner

# Philosophical Criticism for Students: Investigating the Intersection of Literature and Philosophy

By Tim Gillespie

## An Overview and Benefits

Another way to regard works of literature is to see them as occasions for exploring philosophical questions.

The word *philosophy* stretches back to the ancient Greek roots *philos* and *sophos*—literally meaning *loving wisdom*—and describes the ongoing human attempt to seek answers to the deepest questions of life: What is our purpose here? Does life have inherent meaning? What is real? How do we know? How do we determine what is good, what is true, and what is right? How do we construct a world of justice and beauty? How might we best rule ourselves and be ruled? How do we balance the needs of the individual with that of the group? Do we have free will?

At the core of many literary works, from ancient Greek plays to modern science fiction novels, are such philosophical questions. For some, one factor that actually defines “literature”—as opposed to popular or junk reading—is that it deals with essential philosophical questions, provoking readers to thought as it also entertains them, encouraging what Socrates called “the examined life.”

As many writers address philosophy in their fictions and poems, many philosophers have used literary forms to convey their philosophies, starting with Plato and his lively dialogues. The nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche presented many of his ideas in a work of fiction titled *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, twentieth-century French existentialists Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus put much of their philosophic thinking into novels and plays, and current Norwegian philosopher Jostein Gaarder explored the history of philosophy in his worldwide best seller *Sophie's World*. (In this popular 1994 novel, a young girl starts receiving messages in her mailbox—“Who are you?” “Where does the world come from?”—that involve her in a long set of philosophical conversations entwined with a thin strand of plot.)

Philosophical criticism offers many different ways to approach a text. Sometimes the job is simply putting a piece of literature into its philosophical context. Readers will better understand Voltaire’s *Candide* if they know something about the Enlightenment philosophy of optimism, Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* if they know something about Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, and Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* if they know something about existentialist philosophy.



Another philosophical approach to literature is to use different philosophical frameworks to help interpret a work. We might use Plato's allegory of the cave as a metaphor for examining a novel or Aristotle's notions on happiness to assess characters. We might use the thoughts of Nietzsche on tragedy as we wrestle with a sad play. Any of these philosophical frameworks can give us new handles on the literature we read.

In addition, almost every branch of philosophy has found specific expression and exploration in literary works. Metaphysics, for example, is the ancient branch of philosophical questioning that asks, "What is the nature of reality?" Mark Twain's novella *The Mysterious Stranger* probes deeply at this issue, as does much science fiction.

Ethics, the branch of philosophy that explores issues of right conduct, moral duty, and obligation, also finds frequent expression in literature. Fiction in particular can be considered a virtual laboratory for ethical experimentation as fictional characters are put in knotty moral situations with their subsequent actions, motives, reasonings, and consequences played out for the examination of readers. Think of the way a single work of literature such as Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World* raises multiple ethical questions, all of which resonate in today's world: If we could affect the development of new children by genetic manipulation or cloning, should we? What are the moral questions generated by the creation of new forms of life? How should we raise our children? Is behavioral conditioning of children ethical? Is the nuclear family inviolate? Should the state take more responsibility for monitoring family life and protecting children? Is euthanasia ethical? Is the pursuit of happiness the ultimate human value? Is consumption the highest human activity? What are the ethical costs of materialism? Are stability and security more important than freedom? In *Brave New World* as in much literature, ethical philosophical questions seem as essential as plot and characters.

Another traditional branch of philosophy that links with literature is *aesthetics*. Its questions include: What is beauty? What is art? How do we assess the value and quality of beauty? How does art work? How do we judge art? These are questions always relevant to literature study.

In all these ways, we can make helpful connections between philosophy, literature, and literary criticism. Perhaps we should just consider literature as its own branch of philosophy, a special form of philosophic inquiry whose enduring success results from its refusal to offer clear positions and take definitive stances. Or, as the French literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes (1915–1980) expressed it, "Literature is the question minus the answer."

## Limitations and Critiques of Philosophical Criticism

One might argue that—as with any literary lens—when one field of study is brought into focus, others recede into the background. An excessive focus on philosophical questions may cause us to ignore other ways—historical, psychological, or political, for example—to think about literature.

## To Sum Up

Generally, philosophical critics welcome the philosophical ideas that literature offers for discussion and relishes the opportunity for probing deeper questions of life when they read.

Questions philosophical critics ask include: What philosophical ideas or problems are addressed in this literary work? What does it say about human nature or the human condition? What philosophical knowledge or frameworks might be useful in interpreting or digging deeper into this text?

From this perspective, the act of reading literature can itself be a fruitful form of philosophic inquiry.

# Philosophical Criticism for Students: Investigating the Intersection of Literature and Philosophy

By Tim Gillespie

*The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers.*  
—James Baldwin

*A book is the only place in which you can examine a fragile thought without breaking it, or explore an explosive idea without fear it will go off in your face. It is one of the few havens remaining where a mind can get both provocation and privacy.*  
—Edward P. Morgan

## An Overview

Another way to regard works of literature is to see them as occasions for probing important philosophical issues, those big questions that have been with humankind for most of the time we have been writing things down: What is our purpose here? Does life have inherent meaning? What is its meaning? What's the essential nature of our reality? What is real? How do we know? How do we determine what is good, what is true, and what is right? How do we construct a world of justice and beauty? How might we best rule ourselves and be ruled? How do we balance the needs of the individual with the needs of the group? Do we have free will? Who am I?

The word *philosophy* stretches back to the ancient Greek words *philos* (loving) and *sophos* (wisdom), describing the ongoing human attempt to seek wisdom and an understanding of the deepest principles and questions lurking behind everyday life. This has also been the project of much literary production, so we can see a natural affinity between the two endeavors.

The Stanford University Literature and Philosophy program Web site expressed this connection in the typical philosophic form of questions: “Can philosophy and literature . . . achieve more than the sum of the two parts? Can philosophical approaches account for the specific power of literary works, even those that are not overtly philosophical? And can literary devices contribute to philosophical goals—in a way, perhaps, that nothing else could?”

This connection between literature and philosophy is a long one, though it has not always been an easy relationship. In her 1990 book *Love's Knowledge: Essays on*

*Philosophy and Literature*, contemporary American philosopher Martha Nussbaum notes that the modern division between literary and philosophical inquiry does not reflect philosophy's ancient roots: "For the Greeks of the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C., there were not two separate sets of questions in the area of human choice and action, aesthetic questions and moral-philosophical questions, to be studied and written about by mutually detached colleagues in different departments. Instead, dramatic poetry and what we now call philosophical inquiry in ethics were both typically framed by, seen as ways of pursuing, a single and general question: namely, how human beings should live" (1990, 15). In other words, literature and philosophy are simply different forms of thinking about how to gain the same goal of human flourishing.

The Greek philosopher Plato, however, threw a wrench into the works, thereby starting what Nussbaum calls "an ancient quarrel" between the two disciplines. Plato ultimately decided that a utopia would work better if those pesky poets and playwrights with their undependable fictions were banished from it. So philosophical and literary studies have sometimes been seen as separate realms rather than similar ones, but their dialogue is long-standing.

At the core of many literary works, ancient to modern, are philosophical questions. There are issues of political philosophy in the Greek playwright Sophocles' play *Antigone* and multiple philosophical issues in his play *Oedipus Rex*—questions of fate and free will, honorable behavior, and truth. A young reader of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* cannot help but be drawn into the philosophical issues with which the confused young scholar-prince wrestles: the interplay of illusion and reality, the ethics of revenge, the nature of sin and religion, the demands of responsibility, and the question of death. Many contemporary works, canonical and popular, likewise struggle with philosophical questions, from the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges to the science fiction novels of Philip K. Dick.

For some, a factor that may actually define "literature"—as opposed to popular or junk reading—is that it deals with essential philosophical questions. Texts that aspire to be literature (rather than just best sellers with high commercial appeal) unsettle and provoke readers, offer deeper questions and understandings alongside their pleasures, force us to examine life's most nettlesome problems. "The examined life" that Socrates exalted describes exactly what great literature promotes.

At the same time as quality literary artists address philosophy in their fictions and plays, poems, and songs, many philosophers have used literary forms to convey their philosophies, starting with Plato and his lively dialogues.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) presented many of his ideas in a work of fiction, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, putting his philosophical ideas into the mouth of a guru, then adding plot, other characters, poetry, and songs. The twentieth-century French existentialists Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus likewise put much of their philosophic thinking into novels and plays. And the current Norwegian philosopher Jostein Gaarder explored the scope of philosophy in his worldwide best seller *Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy*. In this approachable 1994 work, a young

girl starts receiving messages in her mailbox (“Who are you?” “Where does the world come from?”) that involve her in a long set of philosophical conversations entwined with a thin strand of plot.

In addition, many philosophers have been deeply involved in doing literary criticism. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) applied the same rigorous thinking to Greek tragic plays as he had to ethics, politics, and natural science. Nietzsche, Sartre, and many postmodern philosophers—Adorno, Foucault, Derrida—all considered literary criticism and philosophy part of the same endeavor. The American philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007) made the case that philosophy would be wise to abandon some of its traditions of rigorous logic for the more creative and conversational stance of literary writers.

In all these ways, philosophy, literature, and literary criticism circle and merge and separate and recombine in a grand historical dance. Perhaps we should just consider literature its own branch of philosophy, a special form of philosophic inquiry whose enduring success results from its refusal to offer clear positions and take definitive stances. Or, as the French literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes (1915–1980) expressed it, “Literature is the question minus the answer.”

## Benefits of Philosophical Criticism

Philosophical criticism offers many different ways to approach a text.

Sometimes the job is simply putting a piece of literature into its philosophical context. A reading of Voltaire’s *Candide* is enriched if readers know something about the Enlightenment philosophy of optimism, which Voltaire lampoons. An understanding of Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* can be deepened with a brief primer on both Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, since his character travels on the borderline between those two ancient faith traditions. The Eastern philosophy of Zen Buddhism helps us better understand the power of the simple haiku. Knowing something about existential philosophy enriches an understanding of Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*, and many other modern existentialist-impacted works of poetry, fiction, and film.

Another approach is to use some philosophical framework to help interpret a work. We might use Plato’s allegory of the cave as a metaphor for examining a novel or Aristotle’s notions on happiness to assess characters. We might use the thoughts of Nietzsche on tragedy as we wrestle with a sad play. Any of these philosophical frameworks can give us new handles on the literature we read.

In addition, almost every branch of philosophy has found specific expression and exploration in literary works. Metaphysics, for example, is the ancient branch of philosophical questioning that asks, What is the nature of reality? Mark Twain’s novella *The Mysterious Stranger* probes deeply at this issue in its startling conclusion, pondering the relationship of the objective material world and the subjective individual consciousness. So does German writer Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, its title character spending his

lifetime musing about the ultimate nature of being. And much science fiction is certainly metaphysics made palatable by the spicy seasoning of futuristic adventure.

Ethics, the branch of philosophy that explores issues of right conduct, moral duty, and obligation, also finds frequent expression in literature. Fiction in particular can be considered a virtual laboratory for ethical experimentation as fictional characters are put in knotty moral situations with their subsequent actions, motives, reasonings, and consequences played out for the examination of readers. Think of the way a single work of literature such as Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World* raises multiple ethical questions, all of which resonate in today's world: If we could affect the development of new children by genetic manipulation or cloning, should we? What are the moral questions generated by the creation of new forms of life? How should we raise our children? Is behavioral conditioning of children ethical? Is the nuclear family inviolate? Should the state take more responsibility for monitoring family life and protecting children? Is euthanasia ethical? Is the pursuit of happiness the ultimate human value? Is consumption the highest human activity? What are the ethical costs of materialism? Are stability and security more important than freedom? In *Brave New World* as in much literature, ethical questions seem as essential as plot and characters.

Another traditional branch of philosophy that links with literature is *aesthetics*. Its questions include: What is beauty? What is art? How do we assess the value and quality of beauty? How does art work? How do we judge art?

The nature of literature generates aesthetic questions centered around the idea of *mimesis*, the ancient Greek word that refers to the ways writers try to imitate or represent nature and reality. Is a writer's job to imitate nature in the most realistic way possible? How do we judge the "truth" of fiction? Is it enough that a fictional story *could* have taken place or *ought* to have taken place? How does fantasy literature work as a representation of reality? In what ways is *The Lord of the Rings* realistic or truthful? How can we say one kind of fiction or one novel is more "realistic" than another? Can the make-believe of literature lead us to deeper truths?

For more than a century, people have been writing letters to Sherlock Holmes and visiting his home at 221 Baker Street in London, though Sherlock Holmes, of course, never existed except in author Arthur Conan Doyle's imagination. How can some readers have a genuine emotional response and relationship to a person who never existed? Do we grant literary characters a "real" existence in some different plane of reality? How is it that we can identify with or feel empathy for inventions? Does this make us more empathetic in real life, or less? To what extent should we associate authors with their fictional narrators or characters? Can literary forms achieve things that traditional philosophic reasoning cannot?

Overall, then, how well does the particular text sitting in front of us do at representing nature and reality? All these questions of mimesis and make-believe are aesthetic questions, philosophical inquires applied to literature.

The prime benefit of philosophical criticism is the way it opens literature up to all these larger questions.

## **Limitations and Critiques of Philosophical Criticism**

Because the scope of philosophy is so unlimited and overlaps so many other fields, it's difficult to speak of limitations. However, one might argue that—as with any literary lens—when one field of study is brought into focus, others recede into the background. Does an excessive focus on philosophical questions take us out of the everyday rub of social issues? Do we overlook biographical and historical influences on a text when we consider only its philosophical outlook? We need to take care that a philosophical concentration does not omit other possible ways to interpret, analyze, and evaluate literature.

### **To Sum Up**

Generally, a philosophical critic welcomes the philosophical ideas that literature offers for discussion and relishes the opportunity for probing some of the deeper questions of life. From this perspective, the act of reading literature can be a fruitful form of philosophic inquiry.

# Feminist Criticism for Students: Interrogating Gender Issues

By Tim Gillespie

## An Overview and Benefits

The main goal of feminist criticism is to promote equality by ensuring the fair representation and treatment of women in texts and classrooms.

Ever since humans invented writing, literature has reflected the historical fact that most people have lived in societies where the primary means of education, publication, and interpretation have been largely controlled by and often exclusively reserved for males. Thus, much of our literary record consists of texts written by males with male protagonists and concerns. Men have defined “literature” and established the lists of masterpieces. Female writers, constrained by social and economic limitations, including obstacles to education, have been largely unrecognized, discounted, or discarded from the *literary canon*—that commonly accepted collection of what are somehow considered to be the greatest works of literature. And female characters as represented by male authors have frequently been rendered along a narrow band of stereotypes—mostly as temptresses, virgins, or victims. Thus, a male point of view has dominated the history of literature.

Although there certainly have been exceptions to these generalizations—from the revered ancient Greek poet Sappho to Murasaki Shikibu, the Japanese noblewoman who wrote around the year 1000 AD the classic *Tale of Genji*—overall opportunities for women writers have been severely limited through most of history. Even when the expanding literacy of middle-class female readers opened the doors for early nineteenth-century English writers, such as Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Charlotte and Emily Brontë, they all initially published their fictions anonymously or under male names, concerned about the sort of prejudice expressed by Nathaniel Hawthorne’s nasty comment that his books were being outsold by a “damned mob of scribbling women.” Thus, when the modern feminist era began in the 1960s with its questioning of many social practices, one area of feminist inquiry was literature. This examination included two particularly significant projects, one addressing women as writers and one addressing women as subjects of writing.

The first project included a rigorous reconsideration of the established literary canon. Arguing that any set of masterworks of literature must include a broad range of diverse voices to be truly representative, feminist scholars found and rescued many lost and neglected texts written by women in prior generations. Works from authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Zora Neale Hurston have been successfully resurrected and reconsidered. Looking at books taught in schools, feminist scholars also found women



writers largely excluded from school curricula and textbooks. Thus, young readers were limited. In the books they were reading in English class, girls weren't seeing many successful female writers as role models or female protagonists exhibiting a female point of view, and boys weren't learning from female writers and characters. Pointing out these effects, feminist thinkers supported teachers in rectifying the low visibility of women in school literature. Today, textbooks and school courses generally are more inclusive, and a wider range of reading material is available. Women's voices have become more regularly a part of the chorus, and the result has been a richer song.

As the first big project of feminist criticism was to consider whether women were represented in the literary canon or school curriculum at all, the second big project was to consider how they have been represented, especially in texts commonly used in classrooms. Many analyses found women and girls more often depicted as subservient, acquiescent, weak, or dependent. They are passive observers and fantasizers, mostly preoccupied with domestic and romantic concerns, seldom autonomous. Men and boys, however, are far more often depicted as active, competent, in leadership positions, assertive, adept in problem solving, strong, independent, powerful, adventuresome, and engaged in interesting and challenging tasks. Men in literature tend to act on the world, while women are recipients of others' actions; men focus on self-realization, while women focus on serving and caring for others. Men are the adventurous force, chasing white whales or going to war, while women are the civilizing force, staying home to keep things together.

Stereotyping of behavior can negatively affect the attitudes, self-concepts, and aspirations of young readers, both male and female. Therefore, a dominant activity of feminist criticism has been to encourage readers to be on the lookout for any sexist ideology, even if unconsciously, in both old and new texts, exposing and questioning the assumptions and myths about women revealed in literary works, unmasking any gender-based biases.

As more examples of writing by women have entered the curriculum, a wider range of representations of women has been available to students. The goal is that all young readers can find in their schoolbooks portrayals of women as rich, varied, unstereotyped, and colorful as the portrayals of men.

## **Limitations and Critiques of Feminist Criticism**

A common slam on feminist criticism is that it's too narrow, considering only feminist themes in its interpretations. Another is that it's literary political correctness run amok, and that the only criterion for admittance to the canon of great works should be literary merit, regardless of the author's sex. Replacing tried-and-true classics with works by women simply for diversity's sake is substituting ideological standards for literary ones.

Some women writers themselves resist what they regard as a kind of ghettoization into the category of “woman writer,” resisting the idea that the reception of their work, positive or negative, should be affected by their biological sex. This is marginalization, they argue.

## To Sum Up

In its concern with the way women are treated in literature, feminist literary criticism has broadened our reading and our culture. It has brought a female sensibility to the previously male-dominated literary establishment and canon, helping rediscover lost writers and works as well as raising interesting possibilities for new literary traditions. It has led to more opportunities for female writers and has had an impact on the school English curriculum. It has offered new possibilities for our classroom explorations of literature.

The ultimate goal of feminist criticism, as Lois Tyson has written, is “to increase our understanding of women’s experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women’s value in the world” (1999, 100–101).

# Feminist Criticism for Students: Interrogating Gender Issues

By Tim Gillespie

*Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women far more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.*

—Adrienne Rich

*The work itself, and its depiction of the general human palette in a particular time or place, is the measure of value, not the sex of the writer.*

—Annie Proulx

## An Overview

Feminism in general examines the roles of women in society and advocates for women's rights and opportunities. Over the past four decades, this movement has had a significant effect on many fields, including literary criticism. The main practice of feminist criticism has been to study how literary texts present or ignore women, reinforcing biases or challenging them. The goal is to promote equality by ensuring the fair representation and treatment of women in texts and classrooms. As Judith Fetterley puts it in her book *The Resisting Reader*, “Feminist criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it, by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read” (1978, viii).

This overt agenda—the wish to change the world for the better—is a difference between feminist criticism and many other forms of literary criticism. Feminism in general has been not only a theoretical pursuit but also a high-profile public practice in our society. Feminist activists have worked tirelessly on behalf of women's rights and interests—knocking down barriers, changing laws, entering halls of power, and pointing out the ways women have been and continue to be oppressed, excluded, exploited, marginalized, and silenced.

Feminist literary criticism has likewise had a real-world effect. Books have been challenged for unfair gender representations. The absence of women from the literary canon has been questioned. School booklists have been expanded to include more works by female authors. And feminist theory has challenged some of the assumptions of past forms of literary criticism.

It's hard to separate feminist literary criticism from history. Since humans invented writing, literature has reflected the historical fact that most people have lived in male-dominated societies where the primary means of literary education, publication, and interpretation have been largely controlled by and often exclusively reserved for males. Thus, much of our literary record consists of texts written by males with male protagonists and what have often been considered traditional male concerns: quests, adventures, wars, and explorations. Men have defined "literature" and established the lists of masterpieces. Female writers, constrained in most historical times and places by multiple social and economic bindings, including obstacles to education, have been largely unrecognized, discounted, or discarded from the *literary canon*—that somehow authoritatively determined and commonly accepted collection of masterpieces (as demonstrated by their inclusion in textbooks and anthologies, classrooms and curricula) that we have inherited. And female characters as represented by male authors have frequently been rendered along a narrow band of stereotypes—temptresses, virgins, and victims. Thus, a male point of view has dominated the history of literature.

Certainly, there have been notable exceptions to these generalizations. The first recorded poet in human history whose name we know was a woman, En-hedu-ana, lived around 2285 BCE in the ancient Akkadian society in Mesopotamia. The ancient Greek poet Sappho, who lived in the sixth century BCE, is venerated as one of the greatest lyric poets of all time. *The Tale of Genji*, a classic of Japanese literature, and what some scholars argue is the world's earliest novel, was written around the year 1000 AD by the noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu. A handful of medieval European women writers, mostly nuns, participated in the literary and scholarly cultures of their times—Hildegard of Bingen in Germany, Julian of Norwich in England, and the Spanish Teresa of Ávila. Notwithstanding these notable exceptions, the historic opportunities for women writers have been severely limited.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, expanding middle-class literacy and prosperity in England and America led to an explosion of bookmaking, buying, and reading. Middle-class female readers with education, resources, and time became a significant part of the literary market, which led to the emergence of female writers, including Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Charlotte and Emily Brontë, whose novels are still widely read today, though most of these writers initially published anonymously or under male names. The continuing prejudice against women writers was expressed by Nathaniel Hawthorne's nasty comment about his books being outsold by a "damned mob of scribbling women." Female writers were often relegated to writing romance novels or domestic dramas, which were then criticized as too lightweight and trashy to be considered great literature.

Over a century later, starting in the 1960s, the modern era of feminist criticism flowered alongside a reenergized women's movement in general. (This is sometimes labeled the *second wave* of feminism, the first being the suffrage movement of the early

twentieth century.) Feminist scholarship proliferated, feminist journals and magazines flourished, and women's studies courses and majors multiplied. At the same time, feminist scholars began to reexamine the teaching of literature. This literary rethinking occurred along two avenues of approach, one addressing women as writers and one addressing women as subjects of writing.

That first approach, concerning women as writers, included a rigorous reconsideration of the established canon of honored masterpieces of serious literature. Examining all the markers of the canon before the 1960s—lists of “great books,” literary anthologies and textbooks, school curricula and academic studies—feminists found women writers largely excluded and asked why. One response has been the rescue of many lost or neglected texts written by women in prior generations. Works from authors ranging from Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Zora Neale Hurston have been successfully resurrected and have become a part of the canon and school curriculum because of the efforts of feminist scholars.

Besides this project of restoration and reconsideration of forgotten authors, feminist scholars have questioned the whole enterprise of canon making, challenging old assumptions about what constitutes universal literary excellence. Aren't there multiple measures of quality that require a broad, diverse canon to express? Don't we partly read to find ourselves and help construct our identities as well as to learn about the psychologies of people unlike us? If this is so, don't we need a more wide-embracing canon so all students, male and female, can both find themselves and learn about others? Thus, as some feminist scholars have worked to show how past women writers met the traditional standards of excellence, others have worked to challenge those very standards themselves.

One challenge has focused on genre. When women were confined to writing in letters, diaries, and journals, those forms of writing weren't considered “literature,” but feminist scholarship recognized the potential value in such genres such that today we can find widely published and highly regarded examples of these kinds of writing rediscovered from the past and valued in the present (as well as reinvigorated by their contemporary descendants, the popular genres of memoir and creative nonfiction).

When women finally found publishing outlets and success in the nineteenth century, their work was still largely limited, and a set of stereotypes was quickly put into play. People came to regard the male plot as the quest story, rich with heroism and adventure, while the female plot was the domestic drama in the form of soap opera, drawing room fiction, or Gothic romance, rich with subtle relationships, nuances of behavior, and emotions. Men wrote about the public sphere (politics, war), women about the private sphere (home, relationships). Men wrote on a large canvas, women on a small one. The pressures of marketplace expectations narrowed the possibilities for women writers. Then, to add insult to injury, this narrow range of writing was further demeaned as being by its very nature merely sentimental. Feminist scholars, however, began to deconstruct these old dismissals,

writing convincingly of the value and power of “women’s novels,” showing how a set of limitations could also be an opportunity for expression and subversion.

Perhaps the best case study of such a reconsideration is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the first American book to sell a million copies and the best-selling novel in America in the entire nineteenth century. With its wide readership, sympathetic portrayal of blacks, and heart-wrenching plot about the horrors of slavery, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had a profound effect on America’s ongoing slavery debate. However, from Stowe’s time to ours, the critical reception of the novel has been mixed, the “common wisdom” being that even with its powerful antislavery message, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is unduly sentimental and melodramatic as a literary text. As Duke University scholar Jane Tompkins has noted, such criticism has taught generations of students to equate popularity with low quality, emotions with ineffectiveness, domesticity with triviality; in other words, the settings and concerns of women writers were taught as inherently inferior. Tompkins made a forceful argument that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* should be part of the literary canon.

As the first big project of feminist criticism was to consider whether women were represented in the literary canon at all, the second big project has been to consider how they have been represented, especially in texts commonly used in classrooms with young readers. Many analyses have found women and girls in canonical literature often depicted as subservient, acquiescent, weak, or dependent. They are passive observers and fantasizers, mostly preoccupied with domestic and romantic concerns, seldom autonomous. Men and boys, on the other hand, are more often depicted as active, competent, in leadership positions, assertive, adept in problem solving, strong, independent, powerful, adventuresome, and engaged in interesting and challenging tasks. Men in literature tend to act on the world, while women are recipients of others’ actions; men focus on self-realization, while women focus on serving and caring for others. Men are the adventurous force, chasing white whales or going to war, while women are the civilizing force, staying home to keep things together.

This stereotyping of behavior can negatively affect the attitudes, self-concepts, and aspirations of young readers, both male and female. Writers such as Kate Millett in her 1970 bestseller *Sexual Politics* went even further in their criticism of male representations of female characters in literature, cataloging texts that legitimized male sexual domination and violence, thus promoting the subjugation and exploitation of women.

Therefore, a dominant activity of 1970s feminist criticism was to be on the lookout for the sexist ideology promoted, even if unconsciously, in both old and new texts. In her important 1978 book *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, English professor Judith Fetterley proposed that readers read with an eye to exposing and questioning the assumptions and myths about women revealed in literary works, resisting a book’s assumptions or viewpoints, always ready to unmask its biases.

## Benefits of Feminist Criticism

These two major focal points of feminist criticism—considering first how women have written and second how they have been written about—have had particular benefits for classrooms. The first has brought old texts to our attention, the second, new questions.

That first early concern of feminist thinking, the invisibility of women writers, proved particularly so on U.S. high school reading lists, which were notably lopsided in favoring male authors and characters. Large-scale studies of secondary curriculum by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature found remarkable consistency in the books read in American high school classrooms. For many decades, the most frequently assigned titles remained consistent: *The Odyssey*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Only one of these was written by a woman.

Given this data, feminist critics asked questions: Shouldn't we diversify the curriculum to include more women writers? How have we determined what should be on a list of assigned literary masterworks, anyway? What standards of evaluation have we been using? Who has been making these decisions? What are the costs of this absence of female authors and characters from school-sponsored reading?

The answer to the last question is clear: A school curriculum that offers limited examples of books written by and about women has negative effects on all readers but particularly on girls, for a number of reasons.

The horizons of girls may be limited when they don't see by example that women have been successful professional writers.

Young readers may be less motivated to prize reading if they can't find literary characters to identify with who are like them, so we need to worry about negatively affecting female students' attitudes toward reading. Shouldn't girls as a matter of course encounter many different kinds of female protagonists in the books they read in school—as role models, cautionary figures, heroes and leads, villains and jesters—just as boys do? (And shouldn't boys have the opportunity to encounter and learn about more female characters? A reading curriculum lacking female protagonists limits boys as well as girls. As Liz Whaley and Liz Dodge put the matter in their excellent resource *Weaving in the Women: Transforming the High School English Curriculum*, “If we do not read and study about the many peoples and cultures, including the women, of the world, past and present, how can we ever hope to get along with each other?” [1993, 24]).

One final reason for redressing the gender imbalance is a subtle psychological one. An important function of literature is to take a particular experience or story and, by the artistry of the author, make it seem *universal*—representative of the experience of all readers. Because most of the literature read in school has been written by men and about men, male readers have had their experiences affirmed as universal ones. Women readers, however, have not as often seen their experiences articulated, clarified, and

legitimized in art. In most of what they have read in school, women have had to submit to or adopt a male point of view. They have had to learn to understand and accept male ways of looking at things, often including adopting a male perspective about female characters, while the opposite has not been required. The traditionally unidimensional literary curriculum has thus allowed men to avoid working to understand female sensibilities or to deal with a feminine side. But to succeed in school, females have had to experience male attributes and sympathies. Ultimately, a sense of powerlessness derives from this. The message is that to be universal is to be not female. In postmodern terms, the dominant discourse has been masculine, and women have been trapped in someone else's narrative.

To address all these potential negative effects, one of the main projects of feminist criticism has been to rectify the low visibility of women in literature, especially literature assigned and taught in school. The traditional canon has been enlarged to include more works by women. School textbooks reflect a more inclusive literary tradition. Because of all this activity, a wider range of reading material is available to students today. Women's voices have become more regularly a part of the chorus, and the result has been a richer song.

Another benefit has been that with more examples of women's writing in the curriculum, a wider range of representations of women is available to students. All readers can thus find portrayals of women as rich, varied, and colorful as the portrayals of men.

## **Limitations and Critiques of Feminist Criticism**

A common slam on feminist criticism is that it's too narrow, considering only feminist themes in its interpretations. This is a criticism that can be made of any literary lens. When we focus closely on one particular aspect of a text, other aspects will naturally fade into the background.

As the doors of the formerly male-exclusive club of the traditional canon have been pushed open to admit women, another form of opposition has been to dismiss the effort as a kind of literary political correctness run amok. According to this argument, pure merit should be the criterion for admittance to the club, regardless of the author's sex. Replacing tried-and-true classics with works by women simply for diversity's sake is substituting political or ideological standards for literary ones. Minor works may have to be added to the canon to meet such literary affirmative action quotas.

Some women writers themselves—for example, check out the Annie Proulx quote at the start of this chapter again—resist what they regard as a kind of ghettoization into the category of “woman writer,” resisting the idea that the reception of their work, positive or negative, should be affected by their sex. This is marginalization, they argue. Others worry that they may be pigeonholed by the vague findings that men and women



write in different but predictable ways, asserting that such stereotypes intrude on their imaginative freedom and power as writers. In a letter to *Harper's Magazine*, the American writer Cynthia Ozick worried that liberation for female writers has become a subtle form of regression: "In the name of feminism, 'women's writing' has turned from writerly freedom to circumscription, and sometimes to authoritarian prescriptiveness: I recall being berated in print for an insufficient show, in fiction, of 'mother-daughter bonding'" (1998, 6). Are female writers thus to be read only within the confines of some defined female tradition and limited to a list of specific themes and situations determined primarily by their sex? No writer, Ozick says, should feel limited in this way. No writer ultimately thinks of herself or himself as a female or a male writer. For an artist, the unique human imagination always trumps categorization. Ideological thinking runs the risk of squashing creativity and squeezing out diversity.

Feminist criticism has been charged with these and other limitations.

## To Sum Up

In its concern with the way women are treated in literature, feminist literary criticism has enriched our reading and our culture. It has brought a female sensibility to the previously male-dominated literary establishment and canon, helping us rediscover lost writers and works, as well as raising interesting possibilities for new literary traditions. It has led to more opportunities for female writers and has had an impact on the school English curriculum. It has offered new possibilities for our classroom explorations of literature. And in a contemporary world informed by decades of feminist thinking and activism, opportunities for our female students have never been more abundant.

Questions feminist critics ask include these: Are women represented fairly and fully (or represented at all) in this literary work? Does any gender stereotyping or silencing affect the overall effectiveness of the text? How does the text's treatment of sexual roles and relationships and ideas of masculinity and femininity perpetrate or subvert past and present notions?

The ultimate goal of feminist criticism, as Lois Tyson has written, is "to increase our understanding of women's experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women's value in the world" (1999, 100–101). By those measures, although there is still plenty of road to be traveled, we have come a long way.

# The Issue of Gender Versus Sex

In her influential 1949 book *The Second Sex*, French writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) began making a distinction between the ideas of *sex* and *gender* that has come to be widely accepted. It is a useful distinction to make in the classroom.

In general, these days, *sex* is used to refer to the biological characteristics that distinguish females from males. *Gender*, by contrast, refers to the cultural constructs of femininity and masculinity. Sex is more about anatomical differences, gender about socially learned behavioral differences. (Or, as a teacher of my acquaintance once explained it, “In terms of immutable, nontransferable biological abilities, females can gestate, lactate, and menstruate, while males cannot. And males can impregnate, while females cannot. That’s it. All other differences are learned.”)

The implications are vast. While biology determines sex, society assigns gender and transmits our ideas about it. And since societies differ from one another and evolve over time, ideas about gender vary from culture to culture and change from generation to generation. In fact, our culture’s sense of gender roles has been in flux for the past few decades, altering because of changing circumstances, environments, economies, discoveries, educational inputs, and political activism, including the work of feminists.

Because gender is a cultural construct, we have to be mindful not to assume that what we see as differences between men and women are natural or normal. They may in fact be simply the way our society has defined gender roles. Feminists see these cultural definitions as historically putting women at a disadvantage in terms of power, status, and respect. As gender roles have trapped women—and men, ultimately, too—the notion that they are cultural constructs also means that they can be deconstructed and redefined in more positive and favorable ways for everyone. Thus, keeping in mind the difference between gender and sex can be helpful and hopeful for students.

# An Extended History of Women Writers and Feminist Literary Criticism

One of the projects of feminist literary scholarship has been to research and bring to the attention of readers the accomplishments of remarkable women who have, despite daunting obstacles, found a way to express themselves as writers.

In all of recorded history, the earliest identifiable user of a first-person voice (and, in fact, the very earliest poet whose name we know) was a woman, En-hedu-ana. She lived around 2285–2250 BCE in the Akkadian society that succeeded Sumerian culture in what we have come to call the Mesopotamian Cradle of Civilization—in part because there, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, is where we find the earliest examples of that grand human invention of writing. En-hedu-ana, daughter of a powerful king, was a temple priestess who wrote poetic hymns to the deities and appealed to them for help in a local political dispute. (These hymns written over 4,000 years ago have been preserved largely because so many copies were made in Babylonian scribal schools 500 later; they were apparently popular and well-regarded texts used for teaching scribes-in-training to copy and translate onto their writing pads, which were small clay tablets.) Earlier Sumerian-era poets had written about gods and kings, but En-hedu-anna wrote about herself in relation to these others. In the eyes of many experts, hers is thus the oldest account we have of a human being's awareness of an interior life.

Now fast-forward many centuries. Though only a small amount of her poetry has survived, the ancient Greek poet Sappho, who lived in the sixth century BCE, was long venerated as one of the greatest lyric poets of all time. Plato called her the tenth muse, and works of Sappho could be found centuries later as a standard part of the curriculum in Roman-era academies.

*The Tale of Genji*, one of the classic works of Japanese literature and what some scholars argue is the world's earliest novel, was written around the year 1000 AD by the noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu, a maid of honor at the imperial court. This epic tale follows the romantic life of the displaced son of a Japanese emperor and was probably aimed, scholars think, at an audience of Lady Murasaki's fellow female aristocrats. In addition to this long work of fiction, she left a diary and a collection of more than 100 poems. Long considered one of the greatest of all Japanese writers, Lady Murasaki's works are staples of the Japanese school curriculum. She even graces the 2,000 yen note.

A handful of medieval European women writers, acting in the context of the Catholic Church, appear to have been among the rare females significantly participating in the literary and scholarly cultures of their centuries. The German abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1117), for example, after receiving what she described as a vision of God instructing her to write down what she observed, was a prolific and influential author of poetry,

homilies, liturgical hymns, texts on biology and medicine, theological works, communiqués to bishops and popes, and the longest-surviving European morality play. In an age when few women were permitted a voice, Hildegard seems to have been an active player in the church of her day. And Julian of Norwich (ca. 1342–1416), an English anchoress, wrote about a series of intense visions of Jesus she'd had, *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*, which is often considered the first book written by a woman in the English language. Finally, Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), a Spanish nun and reformer, who has been canonized by the Catholic Church, wrote widely on mystical themes in a graceful prose style. Some of her definitions are included in the church's official catechism, and the few poems we still have from Teresa are lastingly popular in Spanish.

Another early boundary breaker was Christine de Pisan (ca. 1364–1429), who was born in Venice but spent most of her life in France. The daughter of the French court's astrologer-physician, she was married at fifteen and a mother of three not long after. When she was in her early thirties, her nobleman husband died in an epidemic and lawsuits tied up his estate, so she found herself needing to support her extended family. She turned to writing and composed for wealthy patrons many hundreds of short poems and ballads—all in French, her second language. Well-known and highly regarded in her day, Christine may have been Europe's first professional woman writer. She also offered a prominent critique from a female point of view of Jean de Meun's popular *Romance of the Rose* for its slander of female characters, who, Christine asserted, surely would not have used the vulgar language the author put in their mouths. Christine also wrote about women's contributions to society in the remarkable text titled *Book of the City of Ladies*, which celebrates women's peace-making skills, argues against misogynistic stereotyping, and makes a case for letting women join the male-dominated discourse of the day. Christine also wrote a popular poem eulogizing Joan of Arc.

Other women were writing during these medieval years of European history, but most were expressing themselves in forms that had no public visibility. For example, the French nun Héloïse (ca. 1101–1164) wrote wonderful scholarly and personal letters to her husband Peter Abelard that we consider remarkable literature today but were a private correspondence. And Julian of Norwich had a younger English contemporary, Margery Kempe (ca. 1373–1439), a merchant's wife and mother of fourteen children, who produced what some consider the first autobiography in English, which we today call *The Book of Margery Kempe*. This text details the spiritual conversations and a series of pilgrimages undertaken by Kempe over many decades to various holy sites, including Rome and Jerusalem. This account, however, was not a public text, and was essentially lost until it turned up in the private library of an English family in 1934.

As the centuries inched along, other female writers bucked the odds to express themselves. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf says that “all women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn . . . for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds” (1929, 65). Behn (1640–1689) was a prolific author a half-century after Shakespeare who was one of the first females in England to support herself

entirely by her own earnings as a writer. Behn had a remarkable life, which included a trip in her youth to the English sugar colony in Suriname where she purportedly met an African slave leader who inspired her novella *Oroonoko*, one of the earliest published in English. (Some argue that it's actually the first certifiable novel written in the English language.) A popular poet and pamphleteer, Behn was also a playwright who had a number of successful plays running on English stages in the 1660s.

About the same time, in the American colonies, Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672), a member of a well-educated Puritan family that immigrated to America to help establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was crafting poems. Her collection “The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up into America, By a Gentlewoman in such Parts,” was published in England in 1650 (after the manuscript was carried across the sea and submitted to publishers by Bradstreet’s brother-in-law without her knowledge), making Bradstreet the first published American female writer.

Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) was America’s first published African American female. A slave brought from Senegal to serve the Wheatley family of Boston (and apparently named after the slaving ship that carried her away, *The Phillis*), Wheatley was raised and educated classically—she knew some Latin and Greek—with children of her owner’s family. Soon she was a sensation for her poems, the earliest of which was printed when she was twelve. In 1773, a collection of her works published in London, “Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,” brought her fame and praise from George Washington. (Publishers in Boston had refused to print the text, and some critics challenged her authorship, apparently unconvinced that a black female slave could have written the poems. A group of Boston luminaries questioned her and signed a statement attesting to her abilities and her authorship.) Emancipated by her owners after her poetic success, Wheatley ended up nonetheless dying young and impoverished, a drudge in a boardinghouse. Her short-lived popularity has been ascribed to the Christian piety and American patriotism expressed in her poems. To give you a flavor, here’s one of her best-known poems, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1993):

’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
 Taught my benighted soul to understand  
 That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:  
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
 “Their colour is a diabolic dye.”  
 Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,  
 May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, expanding middle-class literacy and prosperity in England led to an explosion of bookmaking, buying, and reading. Middle-class female readers with some education, resources, and time became a significant

part of the literary market. Female writers, however, remained generally rare, though a number of prominent women authors emerged during these years of rapid change. In most cases, though, their gender affected the course of their careers and the reception of their works.

When she was only twenty-five years old, Frances (Fanny) Burney (1752–1840) anonymously sent off her first novel *Evelina* to publishers. She even disguised her handwriting, wanting no one to associate the book with her prominent father, who was a musician and member of London's smart set. At the time, it would have been seen as improper for a young woman to elevate herself into the public eye as an author. A first publisher rejected the manuscript because it was anonymous, but a second published *Evelina* anonymously when Burney's oldest brother posed as its creator. Her father, who hadn't known of or given permission for his daughter's project, soon figured out that Fanny was the author of the smash popular and critical success and became a supporter of her career. (However, he put his foot down when it came to the many stage plays she wrote, which he apparently felt risked her reputation as a proper lady. She thus never had any of them performed except for one that had an unsuccessful single-night run.) Burney became famous when she was revealed as the author of *Evelina*, an epistolary novel recounting the witty perceptions of her hoity-toity society by a sixteen-year-old protagonist who is just approaching marriage age. Subsequently, Burney wrote three more popular novels (including *Cecilia*, a line from which inspired the title of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*), all of which satirized the bluebloods of the day and detailed the aspirations and struggles of women in that constrained atmosphere.

During her long life and successful career, Burney hobnobbed with literary luminaries and the royal family, became a sympathizer of the French Revolution (and married a French general at age forty-one), survived a bout with breast cancer and a mastectomy (performed without anesthesia) that she described in one of the earliest accounts of this disease, supported her family with the revenues from her later novels, and lived into her late eighties. And she kept a diary for seventy-two years, published posthumously in twenty volumes, which many scholars feel offers one of the most vivid and interesting portraits we have of upper-class eighteenth-century English life.

At about the time Burney was crashing the gates of the literary establishment, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) was formulating one of the earliest English-language statements of feminist philosophy—and serving as an exemplification of the inextricable relationship between literacy, literature, and feminist thinking. The daughter of an aristocrat who squandered his family's money and his daughter's ancestral inheritance by his dreaminess and dissipation, Mary Wollstonecraft ventured out before she was twenty to try to support herself as a “lady's companion” or retainer to a wealthy woman, a schoolteacher, and finally a governess, a position from which she was dismissed. Frustrated by what she later called the “Unfortunate Situation of Females, Fashionably Educated and Left Without a Fortune” (a chapter title in her book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*) and forced to rely on her own talents, Wollstonecraft decided

to become a self-supporting author—“the first of a new genus,” as she wrote to her sister. She moved to London and scraped along translating German and French texts and writing reviews for a literary magazine. This work introduced her to the company of London’s intellectual freethinkers and artists, including the progressive and supportive publisher Joseph Johnson, the political philosopher and journalist William Godwin, and fiery Thomas Paine.

In 1788, Wollstonecraft wrote a short novel, *Mary: A Fiction*. (Note that the protagonist shares the author’s first name.) Published by Joseph Johnson, the novel was only a so-so success with many copies apparently remaining unsold, and later in her life Wollstonecraft herself wrote that she considered it a crude and laughable work. However, modern scholars have noted a number of groundbreaking aspects of the text that supported a fledgling feminist discourse.

*Mary* is the story of a neglected young woman from a privileged family. Her father “always exclaim[s] against female acquirements” and her sickly, narcissistic mother is a “mere machine” of conventionality who spends all her time reading sentimental novels and doesn’t want to develop her daughter into someone who might rival her in their social set. Left on her own devices, the spunky Mary educates herself by avid reading, wandering and observing the natural world, relying on the intercessions of household help (learning French from a maid, for instance), and doing charity work among the local impoverished folk. “Neglected in every respect, and left to the operations of her own mind, she considered every thing that came under her inspection, and learned to think” (Wollstonecraft 2008, 5). But then Mary’s brother dies and she becomes heir to the family fortune. Only then does the family engage tutors, but their motive is to get Mary yoked to a suitable husband; thus, the instruction is only in skills, including dancing, that improve her marriageability.

Eventually, to comply with her mother’s deathbed request and to secure her family’s economic situation, Mary agrees to marry a wealthy man she has never met. To fill the hole in her life left by this loveless arranged marriage to a largely absent husband, Mary ultimately forms two romantic (but sexless) friendships—one with Ann, a sickly, impoverished young local woman whom Mary tends and supports, and another with Henry, a brilliant young musician and thinker she meets while tending Ann in Lisbon. Eventually, both her true friends die of consumption, and the book ends with the all-too-young Mary herself ill. The novel’s eyebrow-raising closing lines are, “Her delicate state of health did not promise long life. In moments of solitary sadness, a gleam of joy would dart across her mind—She thought she was hastening to that world where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage” (Wollstonecraft 2008, 97).

Contemporary scholars have noted that *Mary: A Fiction* was radical for a number of reasons. Wollstonecraft’s novel challenged the dismissive treatment of talented young women and offered a portrait of a brilliant, self-educated female who is as strong and independent in her actions (taking her sick soulmate Ann from England to a sanitarium in Portugal by herself, for example) as in her opinions. It criticized typical sentimental

women's novels with their portrayal of delicate, fatuous heroines. It depicted a woman having intimate intellectual and social relationships outside of marriage with both men and women. And it questioned a form of marriage that suppresses rather than nurtures gifted women. Thus did Wollstonecraft cut against the grain of the fictions aimed at women readers of her era.

A couple of years later, in 1790, Wollstonecraft was one of a number of “radical” intellectuals (another was Tom Paine) who responded to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the conservative Edmund Burke's critique of the French Revolution and defense of monarchy and the aristocratic tradition. Her brilliant work of political philosophy, *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, earned her a great measure of fame as she eloquently attacked hereditary privilege, advocated republicanism, and challenged “tradition” (which could, after all, she argued, be used to justify any long-standing practice no matter how odious, including slavery). But this was just the first step in Wollstonecraft's thinking.

A year later, Wollstonecraft extended her argument to include women in the work that has secured her reputation, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy.

In this extended essay, Wollstonecraft argues that women have the same ability to reason as men and therefore deserve the same rights. That many women (at least upper-class ones) tend to act like superficial “spaniels” and “toys” is not because of any deficiency of mind or temperament, Wollstonecraft says, but because they have been denied an education. She advocates an education for women on the basis that it would not only make them better companions to their husbands but also better teachers for their children, which would elevate the whole nation. She even outlines a specific educational plan, with coeducational schools that teach boys and girls in the same way to ensure later intellectual parity between married partners. Though she claims that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, she is careful not to assert that women are equal to men in respect to qualities of strength and moral courage. Thus, though quite bold for her time, Wollstonecraft was also still prisoner of its worldview. Nonetheless, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was a pioneering work of feminist thinking.

Much of the rest of Wollstonecraft's life was a whirlwind of boundary-breaking activity. Believing fervently in the ideals of the French Revolution, she moved to Paris, where she began an affair with an American adventurer, bore their child, and wrote a bird's-eye history of that bloody uprising. She was later abandoned by her partner and left alone with her infant daughter amid the turmoil. She returned to England and then traveled to Scandinavia from where she wrote an innovative travel narrative that includes personal reflections and philosophical speculations on the search for human happiness and the way it is supported or thwarted by different societies. This *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796) became her most popular published work.

Back in England, Wollstonecraft worked with the philosopher William Godwin, became pregnant by him, and eventually married him. She worked on a second novel, *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (note the protagonist's name again), which is considered



her most radical feminist work, though she never finished it. The story concerns Maria, who has been unjustly imprisoned by her dissolute husband in an insane asylum because she tried to escape (with their child and her family inheritance) his abuse. At the asylum, Maria finds a friend in Jemima, an attendant who has her own horrible story of impoverishment and illegitimacy; bound out as an apprentice to a master who beat and raped her, she was forced into abortion and prostitution. Maria also meets a male inmate with whom she has an affair and a child. Ultimately abandoned by him, too, Maria finally (in one of Wollstonecraft's fragmentary endings) finds a measure of fulfillment in starting a new life with Jemima and Jemima's daughter. Their relationship is one of the earliest instances of women of different social classes finding solidarity in their shared experiences of subordination. In her preface, Wollstonecraft noted that her main object was "the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society" (1975, 5).

In 1797, Wollstonecraft had her second child, a daughter also named Mary, but died within days from childbirth-related infection at age thirty-eight. Within months of her death, Godwin published both the uncompleted novel and a controversial (but to him tender, respectful, and quite in line with his wife's frankness) memoir of Wollstonecraft's life that revealed her illegitimate children, love affairs, and suicide attempts. Both works received almost universally scathing reviews. Wollstonecraft's final novel was called indelicate at best and sinful at worst, a defense of adultery and selfishness, and its author was blasted as someone who acted as immorally as she wrote.

Popular disapproval of Wollstonecraft's radical lifestyle muddied her literary, philosophical, and political achievements for many decades afterward. In condemning her behavior, critics often ignored her writing. Only in the twentieth century was her work returned to prominence and seen as a touchstone of feminist thinking.

Oh, and there's one more part of Wollstonecraft's legacy. That second daughter that Wollstonecraft bore just before her death grew up to be a famous writer, too. More about her in a moment.

Mary Wollstonecraft's remarkable life and writing career foreshadowed what was to come in the first half of the nineteenth century, which has been recognized as the breakout era for women writers in England, many of whose works reflect their struggles to be heard.

Only a few years after Mary Wollstonecraft's most productive period, Jane Austen (1775–1817) penned her remarkable streak of six novels that are as popular today as they were in her own lifetime: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (both published in 1818 after Austen's death at age forty-one). The latter two posthumously printed novels included a biographical note by Austen's brother. Because Austen had chosen during her lifetime to publish her fictions anonymously (they were titled by "A Lady"), that note was the first time she was identified as the author. Even though she had the steadfast support of her family, gained enthusiastic reviews of her novels, and earned

a measure of financial independence because of their sales, Austen kept her identity as the author of these popular works private during her lifetime to all except her family and closest friends, not an uncommon stance for women writers at the time. An oft-told story about Austen is that she would write in her sitting room and was happy that the door had a squeaky hinge; thus, she would get a warning if someone was coming in so she could quickly hide her writing under her sewing.

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley (1797–1851), the daughter of the pioneering Mary Wollstonecraft, lived as loud and astounding a life as Jane Austen lived a quiet life. Raised by her prominent, politically radical father, William Godwin, and a stepmother after her own mother died ten days after her birth, Mary Godwin received little formal schooling but was well educated through a combination of her father's instruction and library, a series of tutors and governesses, trips to Scotland to live with a dissenting family, and the lively intellectual atmosphere of her home. She also read the formidable writings of both her parents (including the memoir of her mother's nonconforming life).

At seventeen, Mary met in her home the idealistic aristocrat Percy Shelley, an acolyte of her father's political ideas. They fell in love and soon began a vagabond life of writing, traveling, socializing with fellow young freethinkers, and barely avoiding impoverishment (since they received little family support for their unconventional lifestyles—Percy had abandoned a pregnant wife to pursue Mary).

One of the most creative periods of Mary's life occurred before she turned twenty. She and Percy spent a summer in Geneva, Switzerland, with a group of young poets and intellectuals, including George Gordon Byron. One night after telling ghost stories around the fireplace at Byron's villa, the young creatives spurred one another to write their own supernatural tales, and Mary outlined what would turn out to be her best-known work, the novel *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*. Working on the story for the next few years, Mary finished and published it—anonymously—in 1818. With a preface by Percy Shelley and a dedication to Mary's father and Shelley's intellectual hero, William Godwin, most readers assumed Percy Shelley to be the author. Notwithstanding generally tepid reviews of the novel (though Sir Walter Scott thought it quite smashing), *Frankenstein* became an immediate popular success. Within three years, the novel had been translated into French, and within five years, a successful stage play had been made from it. However, Mary Shelley's name wasn't revealed as the author for more than a dozen years.

Percy and Mary eventually married (after Percy's first wife drowned herself in a Hyde Park lake), lost three children to disease in infancy but raised a fourth, and lived a complicated, bohemian intellectual and romantic life between England and Italy. In 1822, just before Mary turned twenty-five, Percy drowned in the Mediterranean on a boat trip with some friends that included Lord Byron. Mary Shelley spent the remaining years of her life raising her surviving son, traveling, and living a life of words.

A highly productive, wide-ranging writer, Mary Shelley penned a half-dozen novels that explored different aspects of the female experience. *Valperga*, for example, published

in 1823, is a historical novel (a fairly new genre at the time) about a fourteenth-century Italian countess who runs her little kingdom on values of reason and moral sensibility. When forced by her boyfriend the Lord of Lucca (who wants to conquer her town) to choose between him and the freedom of her citizens, she chooses freedom at the price of her life. *Lodore* (or *The Beautiful Widow*), published in 1835, follows the roller-coaster fortunes of the wife and daughter of a man killed in a duel and raises issues of the social roles and education of women. And *Falkner*, published in 1837, presents a female protagonist who uses compassion and sympathy to reconcile her father figure and her lover, enemies sworn to violent conflict.

Mary Shelley also wrote plays, reviews, a series of biographies for an encyclopedia, stories for women's magazines and gift books, an unfinished memoir of her father's life, essays and political discourses, voluminous journals, prodigious amounts of letters, and travelogues touting the value of travel for building sympathetic connections with people in other cultures. She also was an indefatigable champion of her husband Percy Shelley's reputation and editor of his poetry. She died at age fifty-three from what was probably a brain tumor.

Though Mary Shelley has been best known as creator of *Frankenstein* and booster of her husband's works, recent feminist scholarship has recovered many other works of her fertile career, some that have been out of print for more than a century. Contemporary scholars have examined the way her works challenge many of the political philosophies of both her father and husband and the way her gender informs her own articulate political and philosophical views.

Then there are the three famous Brontë sisters, Charlotte (1816–1855), Emily (1818–1848), and Anne (1820–1849), all of whom wrote novels that are now considered part of the English literary canon. Raised in a shabby parsonage on the bleak, damp moors of West Yorkshire, six Brontë children suffered the death of their mother when they were young and an upbringing by their eccentric, hot-tempered father, a country clergyman. When the three unmarried sisters were in their twenties (after losing two older sisters to disease), having few prospects other than their unfulfilling work as governesses in the homes of wealthy Yorkshire families or nursemaids for their father and their opium- and alcohol-addicted brother, Branwell, they collected some of their poems and paid in 1846 to have them published under the pseudonyms of Currer (Charlotte), Ellis (Emily), and Acton (Anne) Bell.

Years later, Charlotte wrote about the sisters' reasons for using these male-sounding but androgynous names:

*Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because—without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called “feminine”—we had a vague im-*

*pression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise. (Gaskell 1858, 335)*

Though their poetry collection was unsuccessful, the brilliant and undaunted sisters began writing novels and sending them off to London publishers. In 1847, Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* was accepted and published to great acclaim, followed shortly by Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Grey*—all still published under the Bell pseudonyms. Much speculation apparently took place as to whether these writers were male or female and even whether these three appearing-from-seemingly-nowhere talents were in actuality one person. Thus, the Brontës were largely unknown—though their work was famous.

Sadly, Emily died in 1848 of “consumption” (tuberculosis), leaving only the creepy, compelling *Wuthering Heights* as her masterwork.

In 1848, Anne Brontë's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, was published. Less a traditional romance than her sisters' works, this novel by Anne offers a realistic story about a protagonist, Helen Huntingdon, who must deal with the degradation and death of her violent, debauched alcoholic husband (a portrait surely driven by Anne's own brother Branwell, who also died in 1848—from complications due to his addictions). English law of the time recognized no legal rights of married women apart from their husbands; they couldn't own property, sue for divorce, or control custody of their children. Yet in her gritty novel, Anne Brontë's protagonist leaves her husband to protect their young son and then lives in hiding, supporting herself and her child by painting. Even though it challenged the social conventions and legal proscriptions of its time in its sympathetic portrayal of a woman forcibly asserting her independence from a monstrously undependable husband, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was wildly popular; the first edition sold out within six weeks.

After Charlotte and Anne traveled to London in 1848 to reveal themselves to their publisher and dispel all the rumors about authorship, Anne decided to add a more public revelation in the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. In her note, she defended her realistic novel against genteel critics who found it disturbingly graphic as well as addressing those who had been speculating on its author's sex: “I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man” (Bronte 1992, 5).

Sadly, Anne died of tuberculosis in 1849, leaving Charlotte and her father as the last remaining members of the disease-stricken family.

Charlotte became the most successful of the sisters, publishing more novels and slowly becoming known among those in the literary circle in London. Her character Jane Eyre was rare in English literature of the time for being a strong woman more concerned

with her own moral probity and independence than in securing a husband. Though the shy Charlotte grew more comfortable among the luminaries of her era, she still spent most of her time in Yorkshire tending to her aging father. In her late thirties, Charlotte married her father's assistant priest but within a year she died while pregnant. Only a couple of years later, the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865) wrote a biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, which did much to secure Charlotte's reputation.

Gaskell, by the way, was a mother of five, wife of a Unitarian minister in Manchester, member of a circle of writers and social reformers (including Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe), and author of a series of remarkable novels, including her first one, about the working-class dressmaker *Mary Barton*, which was published anonymously in 1848.

This pattern of struggle and anonymity would plague female English language writers for some time. One final example will suffice to cement the point.

Mary Ann Evans (1819–1880) became one of the most popular writers of the Victorian age and an author whose works (including *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, and *Middlemarch*) have aged well, remaining in-print literary and critical favorites to our time. Yet the pen name under which all of these works have been published is male: George Eliot.

Evans got a sterling education between boarding schools and the vast library at the estate where her father worked as a manager. In her early twenties, tending her widowed father, she socialized with a circle of Coventry progressives who hosted many radical thinkers of the day, including the socialist utopian Robert Owen, abolitionist and feminist Harriet Martineau, philosopher Herbert Spencer, radical publisher John Chapman, and even Ralph Waldo Emerson when he visited England from America.

Evans's first big writing job was finishing a translation of the German theologian David Strauss's controversial historical life of Jesus. When she was thirty, her father died. Freed from her caretaking role, Evans traveled to Switzerland and then eventually moved to London, determined to make her living as a writer. (She also changed the spelling of her name to Marian.) She soon became the driving force behind John Chapman's left-wing journal *The Westminster Review*, where she was assistant editor and a frequent contributor, a rare female presence in the lively world of London letters. Within a few years, Evans had moved in with the writer George Henry Lewes, an open-marriage proponent who was already married. But both Lewes and Evans considered their unconventional arrangement a true marriage, and Evans began to call herself Marian Evans Lewes; the couple's honesty about their complicated situation was a scandal in London.

At that time, Evans was working on her earliest fictions. Notwithstanding her outspoken voice as a prominent female thinker and artist, she chose a male *nom de plume* for her fiction. Perhaps choosing a male name would distance her from "silly lady novelists" that she excoriated in reviews. Perhaps she wanted to keep her real identity secret so her public notoriety wouldn't affect the critical reception of her fiction. We can't know for sure. For whatever reason, Mary Ann (or Marian) Evans would be known from her era to ours as George Eliot.

Evans's stories were published to positive acclaim in magazines. Her first novel, *Adam Bede*, published in 1859, was an immediate critical and popular success, and there was widespread buzz about this wonderful new writer, George Eliot, who had seemingly come out of nowhere. Some believed the works to be those of a country parson or his wife—and a con man even showed up to claim that he was the actual author. When Marian Evans Lewes finally admitted she was George Eliot, many readers were likely shocked, but her popularity was undimmed for the rest of her life.

Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century, there was a new phenomenon in the growing publishing world in both England and America: the professional woman writer. As publishing became big business, publishers quickly discovered that writing by women, particularly what has been called *sentimental fiction* or *domestic fiction*, sold well. Many scholars have noted that the ascendancy of the novel as a popular literary form was a result of women authors creating female protagonists that expressed the female experience in a woman's voice.

The common trajectory of the most popular nineteenth-century fictions traces the struggles and ultimate triumph of a young female protagonist, an observant and good-hearted albeit innocent character who is orphaned or disinherited or otherwise thrown onto her own resources and comes slowly to realize her worthiness as she ultimately thrives in a cruel world by her wit and goodness. The setting is mostly a house, which reflected that most women were confined to their homes and not included in the broader worlds of commerce and politics. The tales usually end in marriage, with either a good man finally recognized or a bad boy reformed by the spunky heroine. Within a few years, often following this story template, the best-selling novelists of the day were women.

There was a paradox involved for female writers of the nineteenth century. Although the door had finally been opened to their work, this genre that had given them an opening also ushered many of them into a small, narrow chamber of creativity. Many couldn't escape the confines of the sentimental genre's stereotypes, though an argument can be made that any strong-minded heroine was transgressing the expectations of the age. Jane Eyre, for example, a prototypical orphan with moxie, does not have to sacrifice her mind, her moral integrity, nor her independence in her story, even as it concludes in her marriage to Edward Rochester.

Some novels in this tradition definitely pushed the envelope. Anne Brontë's character Helen Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, for example, leaves her violent husband to save herself, a violation of many of the norms of the day, yet an action that can be read only with sympathy and a cheering-on of the plucky protagonist. This was an exception, however. These novels usually ended up reinforcing the dominant discourse of the day, confirming the subordination of women in their societies. Yet the very tension in the plots between the heroines' powerlessness and their desire for control and independence offered an alternative viewpoint—and an insight into the difficult role of the female writer. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note in their important 1979 work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, "the one

plot that seems to be concealed in most of nineteenth-century literature by women . . . is in some sense a story of the woman writer's quest for her own story; it is the story, in other words, of the woman's quest of self-definition" (1979, 76).

Gilbert and Gubar also talk about the common image of eccentricity that surrounds so many nineteenth-century women writers; think of all those depictions—of Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Emily Dickinson—as odd ducks, shy and reclusive. Gilbert and Gubar place this assumption of oddity in a feminist context. In their estimation, these women had to work extra hard to find room in the overwhelmingly male Palace of Art. New members of the previously all-male writing fraternity, they felt an anxiety about authorship but nonetheless had their own stories to tell. Thus, though they often used traditional plotlines and archetypes—the quest tale, the coming-of-age account, the depiction of women as either angels or monsters—they also subtly altered these clichés to include their concerns, the familiar surface patterns concealing deeper levels of meaning. Or, as Emily Dickinson advised in her poem, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant . . .”—lest the unshaded truth of the female condition leave “every man . . . blind.”

Nineteenth-century women writers challenged the silencing and stereotyping of their era, but their historical difficulty was the tricky task of achieving a true female literary authority while simultaneously hewing to and cutting against the grain of patriarchal literary standards. All the necessary resulting concealment, Gilbert and Gubar say, like Jane Austen's hiding her manuscripts under her sewing, is perhaps what makes these nineteenth-century women writers seem eccentric and mysterious—and what may also explain that “madwoman in the attic” in *Jane Eyre* and the similarly closeted characters found in so many novels written by women in this era. Those characters may express projections of these authors' anger at the independent female spirit that had to submit inevitably to a submissive role in society. “Of course, by projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them,” observe Gilbert and Gubar (1979, 78). Thus, the madwoman is “the *author's* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage,” the character who wants to smash the social norms of the day that so limit her. Much of the poetry and fiction written by women “conjures up this mad creature so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be” (1979, 78).

The pressures on female writers were real. There was plenty of pushback from the literary establishment regarding the huge new success of women writers in the nineteenth century. In the mid-1850s, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne whined in an infamous letter to his publisher about the “damned mob of scribbling women”—whose books were vastly outselling his. Though *Scarlet Letter* was a hit in 1850, it couldn't match the sales of Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (40,000 copies sold in two months in 1854) or Susan Warner's *The Hills of the Sbatemuc* (10,000 copies sold on the first day

of its release in 1856), not to mention the smash hit of the entire century in the United States, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This influential novel, which many readers (including Abraham Lincoln) gave credit for turning the tide against slavery in America, was the first U.S. book to sell a million copies.

Hawthorne's snippiness seems to reflect the dismissal of women's writing by many critics—from his time to ours, when novels written by women authors for readers who are predominantly women are often treated disparagingly.

Critiques even came from within the ranks of women writers. In 1856, Mary Ann/Marian Evans (George Eliot) wrote a caustic essay in *The Westminster Review*, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," in which she railed against the vast new market of popular sentimental writers of the era. The essay opens with thunderous opening lines: "Silly novels by lady novelists are a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them—the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic. But it is a mixture of all these—a composite order of feminine fatuity, that produces the largest class of such novels." Dissecting many specific popular novels of what she calls the "mind-and-millinery species," Evans mocks the soap opera plotlines and prevailing clichés (the lover always had to have "a manly breast," for example).

This fiery attack had a serious purpose. Evans says that the great danger of these "frothy" novels is that they "confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of woman," portraying women as too embarrassingly shallow to merit a rigorous education. She concludes by hinting that critics should be tougher in their standards for judging to reduce the "seduction of novel writing to incompetent women." The hallmarks of great fiction, intelligence and discipline, "genuine observation, humor, and passion," should be required equally of female writers as of male writers (Eliot 1856, 442–461). So even from the earliest successful breaching of the book publishing barricades by women, the question of whether the works of female writers should be judged differently than the works of male writers was a hotly debated issue, among female as well as male critics.

By the mid-1800s, this sort of attitude was formalized as a "literary establishment" came into being. As Princeton professor Elaine Showalter has pointed out, when the *Atlantic Monthly* began publication in the United States in 1857, followed shortly thereafter by other serious literary journals, a subtle distinction was confirmed in those pages between serious, often tormented, often popularly ignored male literary giants such as Herman Melville or Walt Whitman and the scores of popular women writers whose works were deemed too trashy to be considered literature. "Why?" Showalter asked. One of the main projects of feminist criticism has been to continue to ask such questions about how, why, and under what circumstances the writing of women has been and should be valued, regarded, and canonized.

As the twentieth century dawned, women writers began to address more directly the conditions of oppression that limited them as authors and humans.

In 1911, for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote a remarkable manifesto, *The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture*. Gilman (1860–1935), coincidentally a



niece of Harriet Beecher Stowe, was a politically active advocate for women's suffrage and other progressive and feminist causes of the early twentieth century, as well as a prolific poet, essayist, magazine editor, and fiction writer. Her best-known story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," was published in the *New England Magazine* in 1892. Based in part on Gilman's own experience with postpartum depression, the story is narrated by a young woman having a bout of "nervous prostration." She is confined by a male doctor and her husband to bed rest in a room with hideous yellow wallpaper. Her anxiety turns into full-blown depression, the reader begins to understand, by the terms of her treatment. Forbidden from working, writing, reading, or talking (from thinking, in effect), the narrator is plunged into mental illness when what she really needs is mental stimulation, freedom, and escape from the room. The cure—obedience and confinement—becomes the disease. Gilman's best-known novel, *Herland*, published as a serial between 1909 and 1916, depicts a utopia composed entirely of women and free of poverty and warfare.

In her 1911 nonfiction text *The Man-Made World*, Gilman included a chapter on "Masculine Literature." In it, she notes that "women's writing," as ghettoized in women's pages in the newspaper and women's magazines, seemed mainly concerned with "Kuchen, Kinder, Kirche and Kleider" (the old German phrase denoting kitchen, children, church, and fashion). If this was the limit of "feminine literature," she asks, what do we recognize as "masculine literature"?

Her caustic answer: men's literature apparently has only two simple branches, the story of adventure and the story of love, both narratives of predatory excitement. The story of love for men is "the Adventures of Him in Pursuit of Her—and it stops when he gets her!" (Gilman 1911, 96). There is little portrayed in these tales for men of the long, complex relationships of marriage and child rearing, as if all that is of interest to a male is pursuit and mating. After that, nothing. In an androcentric culture, Gilman concludes, "Fiction . . . has not given any true picture of woman's life, very little of human life, and a disproportioned section of man's life" (Gilman 1911, 102). This assertion that sexist writing is as deforming to men as it is to women has been another aspect of feminist literary criticism.

Perhaps the best-known text of early twentieth-century feminist literary criticism, the 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*, flowed from the fountain pen of British writer Virginia Woolf (1882–1941). The child of a wealthy and well-connected London literary family, Woolf began writing professionally at a young age. A member of the intellectual and artistic set that we have come to know as the Bloomsbury group, she is considered one of the greatest English-language novelists of the twentieth century for such works as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931). But *A Room of One's Own* has had an equally lasting impact for its discussion of the situation of the woman writer.

Woolf's text was the expanded, published version of a set of speeches she had been commissioned to give on "Women and Fiction" at two women's colleges in Cambridge in

1928, just ten years after women had gained the vote in England. With the victory of the suffrage movement, feminist issues had taken a back seat in the public discourse. Yet, as Woolf noted in a comic account of wandering around the campuses of the fictional “Oxbridge” University, women were still not allowed into the great men’s colleges or their libraries, even to walk on the grass or eat in the dining halls unless accompanied by a fellow of the college. And in comparison to the grand meals and lavishly appointed halls of the men’s colleges, women’s colleges were underfunded and miserly in their accommodations. In her wry way, Woolf spoke of the limitations on women of both this exclusion from some institutions and their ghettoization in others: “I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in” (1929, 24).

In *A Room of One’s Own*, which is wonderfully witty and thought provoking, Woolf asks a big question: What are the conditions necessary for the creation of great literary art? To thrive, she concludes, writers need resources and time, privacy and freedom from poverty. Thus, a woman writer would need some money of her own—an annual stipend to cover housing, food and clothes (£500 would be sufficient for her era, Woolf thought)—and a room of her own, particularly one with soundproofing and a lock on the door. (No writer should have to hide her work under her sewing every time she is interrupted, as Jane Austen did.)

To make her case, Woolf becomes a sometimes caustic but always entertaining tour guide to the history of English literature. For most of that history, women’s voices have been absent. “It is a perennial puzzle,” she writes, “why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet” (1929, 41). Woolf imagines what would have happened if William Shakespeare had had a sister Judith with an equal talent for poetry and an equally deep understanding of the human condition. What could Judith do to express these gifts? Lacking choices, treated as property, kept from schooling and thus likely illiterate, not allowed to freely roam the nearby woods as her brother was, kept in virtual servitude by household drudgery, probably forced into an arranged marriage, most likely repeatedly impregnated starting at a young age, unable to run away to London to find work as Will had, how *could* Judith exercise her passion for poetry? Woolf’s conclusion, she couldn’t: “Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty” (1929, 49).

Often even that £500 and a private room wouldn’t be sufficient. For women writers, Woolf notes, have had to face more than just the material obstacles all writers must; in addition, they have had to address active resistance because of their sex: criticism in their communities for their folly, the domestic pressure of household obligations,

sneering and skepticism from the literary establishment. Some critics Woolf quotes just flat-out believed that women are inferior as writers and thinkers. Others demeaned typically female subject matter. Think of the bind for women writers, Woolf argues. Even when middle-class women began to write in the late 1700s—a change that Woolf says she would “think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses” (1929, 65) if she were writing history books—they still had daunting obstacles.

Women had few role models or traditions to follow, which might explain why they gravitated to the relatively young and malleable literary form of the novel rather than more established genres of poetry and drama. Even the comfortable middle-class woman was largely confined to writing in the common family sitting room and was constantly interrupted by children and chores. She was not allowed to go out alone, to travel, to transact with crowds of people in urban areas or experiences in the wider world, to participate in realms of commerce or politics. In this limited existence, what she could carefully focus on was the drama of the sitting room. Yet then she had to deal with the perception that the domestic drama was an inconsequential female concern when compared with the kingdoms ruled by males. Why, Woolf asks, is a book dealing with war important while a book dealing with the feelings of women in a drawing room unimportant? Why is a battlefield a more worthy setting for a story than a shop (1929)? Limited by law and custom to a narrow world, the woman writer was simultaneously criticized for writing about that world, Woolf notes.

No wonder that those early pioneers such as Aphra Behn, who were the first to make a living by their writing, had such a rough go. No wonder Woolf’s immediate successors, the women writers of the nineteenth century, such as Charlotte Brontë, Mary Ann Evans, and the French writer Amandine Dupin chose to veil themselves in male names: Currer Bell, George Eliot, and George Sand. No wonder some of them were angry.

The pity of this understandable anger, says Woolf, is that it works against the unimpeded, incandescent quality of mind characteristic of the greatest writers. Literary masterworks, she feels, come from free and capacious imaginations. The suppression of any writer leads to bitterness, protest, and preaching, which block these qualities of expansiveness and mar a story. Woolf uses the deformed life of Charlotte Brontë as her example, and notes that anger negatively affected Brontë’s work:

*She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance. She remembered that she had been starved of her proper due of experience—she had been made to stagnate in a parsonage mending stockings when she wanted to wander free over the world. Her imagination swerved from indignation . . . We feel the influence of fear in [her portrait of Rochester]; just as we constantly feel an acidity which is the result of oppression, a buried suffering smouldering beneath her passion, a rancour which contracts those books, splendid as they are, with a spasm of pain. (1929, 73)*

The historically constrained conditions of women's lives also constrained their imaginations, Woolf believed.

In addition, women writers from the nineteenth century to the present had to work hard to “kill the angel in the house,” as Woolf called it in another essay (1942, 236). In other words, women writers had to battle their own sense that it wasn't quite proper or decent for a woman to deal with truthful and tricky feelings about relationships, morality, and sex.

After laying out all these obstacles strewn in the historic path of women writers in England, Woolf finished up her speeches to the young college students she was addressing with some hope and inspiration. Regardless of the formidable impediments, women novelists had done remarkable work, she notes. The earliest ones were stalwart firebrands whose work still conveys this message: “Literature is open to everybody . . . Lock up your libraries [to access by women] if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (1929, 75–76).

Woolf mentions one more by-product of the obstacles faced by female wordsmiths. In the absence of any tradition to follow, women writers had to become originators as well as inheritors. Woolf notes the shapely, reflective sentences of Jane Austen's fiction, so different from more typically aggressive, endzone-focused male prose. And women writers were able to bring new topics to readers' attention because so much of women's experience, such as female friendship, had been previously unexpressed and unrecorded. Women writers were also able to bring new angles to old topics—men, for instance. Thus, Woolf celebrates what she sees as the differences in male and female perspectives: “It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men” (1929, 88).

Ultimately, says Woolf, all writers are limited if they wear the blinders of sex. There are male and female aspects of every brain, and Woolf approvingly quotes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's comment that great minds are androgynous. If males only write with the male sides of their brains, celebrate male virtues, enforce male values, and describe the world of men, their work won't be universal. The same goes for female writers. Such limitation is fatal to the imagination and to literature. “Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness” (Woolf 1929, 104). Sexual warfare or limitation narrows the imaginative generosity Woolf believes is essential to the production of lasting art. “All this pitting of sex against sex, of quality against quality; all this claiming of superiority and imputing of inferiority . . .” seems to belong to a junior high school consciousness, she says (1929, 106).

So what is Virginia Woolf's final advice to young women who aspire to write, besides trying to arrange for material security and a room of their own? “So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters . . . But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery . . . it is much more important to be oneself than anything else” (1929, 106, 111).

For the next few decades of the twentieth century, women writers remained staples of best-seller lists, but their works didn't generally show up in most anthologies or on college or high school English course lists. Of the sixty Nobel Laureates in Literature from 1901 to 1960, exactly five recipients of what is arguably the world's most prestigious literary prize were women: Selma Lagerlöf from Sweden in 1909, the Italian writer Grazia Deledda in 1926, Sigrid Undset from Denmark in 1928, American writer Pearl Buck in 1938, and the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral in 1945. Most literary critics were male, gender issues were not a hot topic, and no one was talking much, as Virginia Woolf had, about specifically female ways of writing or reading.

Then the 1960s hit with a bang, and the modern era of feminist criticism flowered alongside a reenergized women's movement. Women writers, who had for more than a century been among the most popular of authors, finally began to take seats at the table of the literary establishment—as critics, teachers, editors, publishers, and artists. The creative works of female writers at last had a chance to make it onto school booklists, university course curricula, and literary award lists. The doors of the canon began to slowly creak open, and women writers walked in.

# Political or Advocacy Criticism for Students: Engaging with Social Justice Issues Through Literature

By Tim Gillespie

## An Overview and Benefits

Many critical approaches can be lumped under the label *political criticism*, but all of them examine and judge how works of literature attempt to improve the social and political conditions of society. Their proponents take advocacy positions, viewing literature as a cultural arm of the struggle for social justice.

Political issues have found their way into literary texts ever since humans began to write. From the ancient Greek epics to the Bible, from Charles Dickens's novels attacking Victorian poverty and child labor to Barbara Kingsolver's novels addressing contemporary American problems, writers have taken political positions in their works. In some cases, we can actually measure the positive effects of literature on social conditions. Dickens's novels helped spur the reform of England's Poor Laws. The novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* turned the tide in opposition to American slavery. And Upton Sinclair's muckraking 1906 novel *The Jungle*, exposing awful conditions in Chicago meatpacking plants, led to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act. So literature can make a difference.

Many thinkers have noted particular qualities of literature that make it especially conducive to political expression and activism.

In his 1821 essay "In Defence of Poetry," British poet Percy Shelley stressed the power of the human imagination. We will not, he indicated, be so likely to exploit other people if we cultivate the capacity to imagine that we could be them. Living imaginatively in the skin of different characters may deter stereotyping and cruelty and promote human rights. By means of cultivating this empathy, literature is by its nature revolutionary.

Plus, writers often give voice to voiceless people—think of the barely literate character Celie in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, who learns to speak up for herself—which offers an alternative to official languages of power and authority. Literature's focus on the individual addresses the political question, "How do social forces condition individual lives?"

In addition, the precision and honesty of literary language is an antidote to the manipulations of political language, as George Orwell argued in his famous 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language."

Perhaps the most direct form of political writing is bearing firsthand witness to oppression. Our understanding of the full horror of the Holocaust would be incomplete without the brave accounts of Anne Frank, Eli Wiesel, and others. As Nelson Mandela wrote on the dust jacket of the 1993 anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, “Poetry cannot block a bullet . . . but it can bear witness to brutality—thereby cultivating a flower in a graveyard.”

All these qualities make literature by nature political.

As literary works raise questions about the injustices of their time and place and making, so do they encourage us to critically question conditions in our time and place and of our making. Have the problems and challenges revealed in the literary work been addressed in our world today? Does the work shed light on any injustices we should be working to overcome?

For politically engaged writers and critics, art created just for entertainment is useless. They believe literature should have the goal of human emancipation and the transformation of society.

## Limitations and Critiques of Political Criticism

There are thinkers who don't like mixing politics with literature. This view holds that art should transcend politics. The local grit of social causes comes and goes, according to this argument, but great art abides longer because it speaks to more transcendent human realities. For example, Shakespeare sneaked a lot of sly political thrusts into his plays, but we read them today for their remarkable artistry and their treatment of such timeless human issues as love and death rather than for their political subtext. A narrow political agenda cannot produce literature that lasts, according to this viewpoint.

Gender studies theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick lamented what she calls “good dog/bad dog” criticism, where texts whose politics we agree with are praised and those we disagree with are berated. The result is narrow-minded, where we dismiss any work that challenges our ideas and decide the only good books are ones that support our politics. Advocacy criticism runs the risk of closing our minds to literature's multiple provocative ideas, says this critic.

## Varieties of Political Criticism

Contemporary political criticism comes in many different forms, including the following list of general and often intertwined areas of ongoing political inquiry into literature. Each has its own unique set of questions.

**Feminist criticism** examines the ways in which literature reinforces or challenges the political, social, economic, and psychological oppression and diminishment of women.

**Multicultural criticism** seeks to redress the historical domination in literature of the works of white men with Eurocentric viewpoints, making room on bookshelves and school booklists for works from authors of more varied backgrounds.

**African American criticism** makes sure black writers and experiences are represented in the literary canon and in classrooms, examines old texts for racial stereotypes, and defines traditions in African American writing.

**Postcolonial criticism** deals with the ongoing historic processes of colonization and decolonization, examining the rich explosion of literary output of writers from colonized and formerly colonized places.

**Marxist criticism** stems from the ideas of Karl Marx, who maintained that art has a place in the revolutionary process of improving the human condition by showing how humans have experienced economic exploitation.

**Lesbian, gay, and queer criticisms** examine representations of homosexual characters in literature for bigotry and support texts treating gay and lesbian issues directly and fairly, all to battle homophobia.

**Ecocriticism**, sometimes called **ecopoetics**, or **biopoetics**, explores the relationship of literature and the natural world, aiming to get readers thinking about their interactions with the environment.

## To Sum Up

The list above briefly outlines just some of the more prominent forms of political criticism, literary approaches that seek in their own ways, whether we agree with them or not, to interpret, analyze, and evaluate works of literature based on the way they help improve society and better the human condition.



# Political or Advocacy Criticism for Students: Engaging with Social Justice Issues Through Literature

By Tim Gillespie

*I believe that literature must address itself to the problems of its time. Authors must write with the conviction that what they are writing can help others become more free, more sensitive, more clear-sighted . . . Literature's mission is to arouse, to disturb, to alarm, to keep men in a constant state of dissatisfaction with themselves.*

—Mario Vargas Llosa

*Despite what your high school English teacher may have told you, literature does not make us or our society better.*

—Judith Shulevitz

## An Overview

Many critical approaches can be lumped under the label *political criticism*, but all of them examine how works of literature expose grievances and attempt to improve the social and political conditions of society. And all of these approaches ultimately judge works on the extent to which they help make the world a better place. Their proponents take strong advocacy positions, viewing literature as a cultural arm of the struggle for social justice.

Political issues have found their way into many of the world's most revered ancient texts, from the epics of Homer to the Bible. Many prominent writers of antiquity have been political in their work, from the prominent Tang-era Chinese poet Du Fu (712–770) to the Japanese *Tale of Genji* author Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 1000), from the ancient Greek playwrights to European writers considered the fountainheads of their national literatures such as Italy's Dante and England's Chaucer.

The British Romantic poets of the late 1700s and early 1800s articulated some of the most powerful claims for political writing. Bubbling with the ferment of Enlightenment ideas, inflamed by democratic revolutions in the United States and France, and distressed by the harsh realities of the Industrial Revolution, these writers viewed art as a powerful political tool. In the face of regal tyranny, political oppression, abusive capitalism, class bias, and factory exploitation, the individual imagination was seen as a liberating and creative human force.

As William Blake put it in his poem “Jerusalem,” “I must create a system or be enslav’d by another man’s” (1904, 8). These writers viewed their task as transforming society to reflect the values embodied in literary art—the celebration of individual creative freedom, the fidelity to truth by which literature challenges the lies of unworthy authority, and the empathetic imagination that commits one to social justice for all. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelley, in particular, all engaged themselves enthusiastically in political journalism and political causes as well as political art. In his 1821 essay *In Defence of Poetry*, Shelley made an eloquent argument for the political force of imagination. We will not, he indicated, consent to exploit other people in factories or fields if we truly have the capacity to empathize fully with their circumstances, to imagine that we could be them. By means of cultivating that empathy, literature is by nature revolutionary.

UCLA history professor Lynn Hunt confirmed Shelley’s idealistic ideas in her 2007 history of human rights movements, *Inventing Human Rights*. Hunt says the explosion in popularity of novels in Europe during the eighteenth century, especially when fiction began to take “regular folks” for its subject rather than royals and nobles, was crucial in leading people beyond their old class-bound frameworks to see one another as fellow humans worthy of sympathy and identification. Living imaginatively in the skin of different characters may deter stereotyping and cruelty as well as any abstract system of morals. Hunt thus sees the spread of literature as influential in the spread of human rights sympathies.

In fact, writers, including most notably Mark Twain, played a major part in what was arguably the first international human rights crusade, the Congo Reform Movement of the early 1900s protesting King Leopold of Belgium’s horrifyingly murderous exploitation of Africans. Twain, at the time the most famous author in America, served as a vice president of the group, lobbied in Washington, D.C., numerous times alongside Booker T. Washington for federal government action, spoke at public meetings around the country about the Congo, and wrote a scathing satire, *King Leopold’s Soliloquy*, whose royalties he donated to the Congo Reform Association.

Other thinkers have noted other qualities of literature that make it conducive to political expression and action.

One of those qualities inheres in literary language. In his famous 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell railed against what he saw as accelerating word abuse by politicians and pundits. This problem was not a mere matter of style, Orwell asserted, but one with serious consequences. Lifeless prose encourages orthodox thinking, euphemisms conceal harsh truths, vagueness drives out precision, inflated prose nurtures insincerity, and clichés allow people to avoid thinking. In other words, sloppy language corrupts thought. Writers committed to fresh, sharp language help make our political discourse more thoughtful and honest.

Writers have also given voice to the language of the downtrodden. Think of the fascination of great writers with local dialects and the oratory of the oppressed—

alternatives to official languages of power and authority. For example, Mark Twain gave African American vernacular a fair hearing in his novels, and Alice Walker captured brilliantly the emerging voice of the painfully abused character Celie in her novel *The Color Purple*. Again and again, literary artists have asserted the legitimacy of everyday peoples' voices. And they are singular voices, too. Literature's focus is on how the individual must respond to "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," as Shakespeare put it. As American writer Robert Stone has written, it's a novelist's responsibility to address the question, "How do social and political forces condition individual lives?" These literary habits—the elevation of many voices and the celebration of the individual—make literature by nature political.

There is, in any case, a long tradition of writers applying their creative energies to both art and politics and conceiving of their writing as a tool for social change. Charles Dickens's novels, for example, include fierce social commentary on Victorian poverty, child labor, stultifying public schools, unregulated financial market speculation, and the mistreatment of women. A woefully incomplete list of politically engaged literature would include most of Dickens, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and "A Modest Proposal," Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills," Stephen Crane's *Maggie A Girl of the Streets*, John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, and countless others. For these authors, political commentary and literary craft are inseparable.

In some cases, we can actually measure the effects of literature on social conditions. Dickens's novels helped spur the reform of England's Poor Laws, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's popular 1843 poem "The Cry of the Children," a lament about foul conditions in English factories, contributed to the enacting of child labor laws. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* turned the tide in opposition to slavery. And Upton Sinclair's muckraking 1906 novel *The Jungle*, which exposed awful conditions in Chicago meatpacking plants, led to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act.

Perhaps the most direct form of political writing is bearing firsthand witness to oppression. Our understanding of the full horror of the Holocaust would be incomplete without the brave and terrifying artistry of accounts from Anne Frank, Eli Wiesel, Primo Levi, and others. The poet Carolyn Forché, who has edited anthologies of political poems that she calls "poetry of witness" from oppressed writers around the world, has spoken of the necessity of using poems as testimony against torture and tyranny. As Nelson Mandela wrote on the dust jacket of the 1993 anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, "Poetry cannot block a bullet . . . but it can bear witness to brutality—thereby cultivating a flower in a graveyard."

In places where freedom is restricted, literature is often considered downright dangerous, a vehicle for subversive ideas, and is often suppressed and censored because

of its potential political power. Important writing—art of protest and liberation—has at times been created under conditions of great oppression. During the most repressive heyday of the former Soviet Union, for example, a network of *samizdat* (underground presses) kept subversive works in circulation, including those of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who said in his 1970 Nobel Prize speech: “The simple act of any ordinary courageous man is not to take part, not to support lies. Writers and artists can do more: they can vanquish lies. In the struggle against lies, art has always won and always will.”

In more recent years, we have seen politically active writers in trouble with their governments in many places, even internationally prominent artists such as Nobel Prize winners Wole Soyinka in Nigeria, Nadine Gordimer in South Africa, José Saramago in Portugal, Gao Singjian in China, and Orhan Pamuk in Turkey, all whose embrace of free expression made them threatening to the dominant political powers where they lived. One of the most prominent worldwide literary organizations, International PEN, has been dedicated since 1921 to freedom of expression and to supporting the crucial role that writers play in changing and developing civil societies. The precarious position of writers in many places is manifest in many of the activities of International PEN—an annual “Day of the Imprisoned Writer” event, campaigns on behalf of writers under their governments’ thumbs, and more.

For many writers, art created just for art’s sake is useless ornamentation, mere entertainment for an elite. Politically engaged writers believe literature should have the goal of human emancipation and the transformation of society. This attitude—that art should be one of the means we use to actively help make the world a better place—is at the heart of political writing and criticism.

## **Benefits of Political or Advocacy Criticism**

Considering the political dimensions of a work of literature has benefits not only for readers but also potentially for the wider culture.

The main benefit is the way our analysis of the political dimensions of a novel or play or poem encourages critical thinking about political issues in general. As literary works raise questions about the injustices of their time and place and making, so do they encourage us to critically question conditions in our time and place and of our making. Have the problems and challenges revealed in the literary work been addressed in our world today? Does the work shed light on any injustices we should be working to overcome?

From whatever point on the political spectrum it comes, political criticism’s aim is to advocate for art’s power to engage the imagination in ongoing social issues. Political critics celebrate the belief that literature has a special capacity to move readers in a political way—by raising consciousness, bearing witness, arousing indignation, questioning falsehoods, putting human faces on suffering, deconstructing pat formulas and comfortable bromides, exercising the free and antiauthoritarian imagination,

cultivating empathy, and speaking truth to power. With all this capacity, writers have a responsibility to use their literary tools for social good.

## Limitations and Critiques of Political Criticism

There are thinkers who don't like mixing politics with literature. This view holds that art should transcend politics. The local grit of social causes comes and goes, according to this argument, but great art abides longer because it speaks to more transcendent human realities. For example, Shakespeare sneaked a lot of sly political thrusts into his plays, but we read them today for their remarkable artistry and their treatment of such timeless human issues as love and death rather than for their political subtext. And Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is ripe with satire of specific political issues and figures of his time, but we ignore most of those forgotten matters. *Gulliver's Travels* is still read because it deals with more universal issues of human folly and foolishness in general. A narrow political agenda cannot produce literature that lasts, according to this viewpoint.

In addition, literature motivated by a specific political agenda might subordinate complex human truths to political ideology. African American writer James Baldwin (1924–1987), for example, whose works powerfully exposed racism, interestingly criticized in his famous essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” the way he felt too many protest novels present characters more as symbols of a social wrong rather than as complicated individuals, thereby turning literature into propaganda.

Others who dislike political criticism claim it's too limited a lens through which to view and judge literature, often narrowing response to the single factor of how a text treats one issue: gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, or whatever. The result at its most reductive is what gender studies theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick lamented as “good dog/bad dog” criticism, where texts whose politics we agree with are praised and those we disagree with are berated, without acknowledging any in-between response that recognizes the complexity of literary texts and the cultures they explore.

Literature we encounter will surely often express political or social convictions we don't share. So must we then dismiss any work that challenges our ideas? There's danger in deciding that the only literature of quality is that with which we agree or whose politics supports ours. Given that standard, what will readers ever learn? Advocacy criticism, according to this argument, closes the mind to literature's multiple provocative ideas.

## Varieties of Political Criticism

Contemporary political criticism comes in many different forms, including the following list of general and often intertwined areas of ongoing political inquiry into literature. Each has its own unique set of questions.

**Feminist criticism** examines the ways in which literature reinforces or challenges the political, social, economic, and psychological oppression and diminishment of women.

**Multicultural criticism** seeks to redress the domination in popular culture and school curriculum through the 1960s of the works of white men with Eurocentric traditions and viewpoints (leading to the famously cheeky shorthand *DWM* for all the Dead White Males in the canon). In response, it has sought to make room on bookshelves and syllabuses for previously excluded and neglected work by writers from all possible backgrounds so that our literature reflects the full diversity of the human experience, confirming our commonality as we are reminded of the essential shared human experiences of people from vastly different circumstances, times, and places.

**African American criticism** is the ancestor of all multicultural criticism, not surprising given the long history of black people in America and the particularly influential contributions of African Americans to the literary arts. Its projects have included making sure black writers are represented in the literary canon and in American classrooms, critically examining old texts with an eye on the visibility and accuracy of representations of the black experience, combating racism in literature, and defining a tradition of African American writing.

**Postcolonial criticism** is a newer form of thinking about literature, beginning with the historic period of the late 1800s when European nations raced to lay claim to the vast majority of the earth's surface through military, cultural, religious, and economic colonization. The historical processes of colonizing and decolonizing large parts of the globe have had such a huge impact that a whole field of scholarship has arisen to deal with what those processes unleashed, including complex issues of displacement, language, oppression, identity, power, race, and class. The resulting dislocations and energies have been captured in many forms of art, including literature. Postcolonial critics have dissected demeaning representations of colonized peoples by writers from the colonizing powers and promoted study of the rich explosion of literary output of artists from colonized and formerly colonized places. As the poet Naomi Shihab Nye has noted about the value of reading poetry from many places, "this same sky joins us to them" (1996, 124).

**Marxist criticism** stems from the ideas of German philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883), who maintained that art has a place in the revolutionary process of improving the human condition by showing how humans have experienced economic exploitation and protested against it. Though many readers may vigorously reject the Marxist goal of a socialist or communist utopia, the analytic tools of Marxist criticism offer another angle on texts, examining ideologies subtly or overtly promoted in literary works and judging texts for their relevance to working people: Does this work reveal and condemn oppressive social and economic forces and ideologies? Does it raise our consciousness about the plight of workers, about class issues, about power relations, about injustice? Are characters from all classes equally well portrayed? Does the work present any solutions or alternate visions? Does it improve society?

**Lesbian, gay, and queer criticisms** are approaches that emerged in the 1990s. Their main emphasis has been to examine representations of homosexual characters in literature for bigotry and to support texts treating gay and lesbian issues directly and fairly, particularly supporting young readers who may feel the sting of homophobia. In addition, because so many canonized writers have been homosexual (a partial list would include Edward Albee, James Baldwin, Truman Capote, John Cheever, E. M. Forster, Allen Ginsberg, Tony Kushner, Amy Lowell, Wilfred Owen, Marcel Proust, Adrienne Rich, Gertrude Stein, Thornton Wilder, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams, and Virginia Woolf), another question has been a consideration of the influence of sexual orientation on literary texts. One thread of this thinking is the sense that the experience of gay writers in societies where they have been marginalized and shunned has given them unique outsiders' insights on the human condition. The ultimate goal for gay and lesbian criticism has been to expose stereotypes and fight prejudice.

**Ecocriticism**, sometimes called **ecopoetics**, or **biopoetics**, is a newer form of criticism with roots in the American West. An offshoot of the environmental movement, ecocriticism explores the relationship of literature and the natural world, aiming to get readers thinking about their interactions with the environment. So ecocritics ask what a work of literature teaches: What is the attitude toward nature expressed by this work? Is it romanticized, respectful, fearful, rapacious? Does the work treat nature as something humans must coexist with or as something humans must battle and master? Are humans considered part of the natural setting or separated from it? How is landscape treated? What are the underlying ecological values of the work? What attitudes and behaviors might they engender toward the earth?

Another project of ecocriticism is to boost the literary legitimacy of the genre of nature writing, a powerful strain in American literature when we think of the effect of the work of Thoreau and all his successors.

This brief list outlines some of the more prominent forms of political criticism, literary approaches that seek in their own ways, whether we agree with them or not, to interpret, analyze, and evaluate works of literature based on the way they help improve society and better the human condition.

## To Sum Up

Political critics read with an eye to the way literary works can be resources for analysis, resistance, and transformation of society.

Regardless of the potential pitfalls of political criticism, its aim of creating more thoughtful and critical citizens and thus a more just society is worth examining. To our benefit, the arena where literature engages with politics is a lively, rollicking one.

# Varieties of Political Criticism

Contemporary political criticism comes in many different forms. The following list is not conclusive, nor are the categories neat or mutually exclusive. These various approaches weave around each other in a lively intellectual square dance, joining and separating, moving around to do-si-do with other approaches, forming complex patterns. Consider them general albeit sometimes intertwined areas of ongoing political inquiry into literature. Each has its own unique set of questions that students can apply to what they read. Each could provide its own useful extended unit of study.

**Feminist criticism** examines the ways in which literature reinforces or challenges the political, social, economic, and psychological oppression and diminishment of women. (Check out Chapter 10, “Feminist Criticism.”)

**Multicultural criticism** is a response to the fact that popular culture and school curriculum in the United States were dominated until the 1960s by the works of white men with Eurocentric traditions and viewpoints (leading to the famously cheeky shorthand *DWM* for all the Dead White Males in the canon). Multiculturalists argue that this dominance is not a matter of quality but rather a result of the oppressions and marginalizations of history. In response, they’ve sought to make room on bookshelves and syllabuses for previously excluded and neglected work by writers from all possible backgrounds. The traditional canon has been aggressively challenged with the goal of diversifying the books students read. Broadening the curriculum means broadening students and preparing them to operate in an increasingly multicultural society and shrinking world. As Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. noted in his 1992 book *Loose Canons*, “Ours is a . . . world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender. And the only way to transcend those divisions—to forge, for once, a civic culture that respects both the differences and commonalities—is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture” (1992, xv). Literature is seen by multiculturalists as a crucial tool in such a horizon-widening education.

This political effort to influence educational curriculum has been supported, interestingly, by the changing reading tastes of the general public. In the last half-century in particular, as the United States has become increasingly multicultural and as awareness of our polyglot national roots has expanded, authors from previously ignored or excluded backgrounds have been able to find receptive publishers and enthusiastic readers. The increasing popularity of multicultural literature in the marketplace has made the argument for multicultural inclusion in the schools easier to make, perhaps. No one needs to search high and low for multicultural literature for the school curriculum in an era when the best-seller lists are rich with multicultural offerings.

African American writers in particular have long had prominent standing in the American literary cosmos. (For more on their contributions, see the section on African American criticism to follow.)



Starting in the 1950s and 1960s, a postwar generation of Jewish American writers—E. L. Doctorow, Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Grace Paley, Chaim Potok, Philip Roth, J. D. Salinger, Irwin Shaw, and two who won the Nobel Prize in Literature, Saul Bellow (1976) and I. B. Singer (1978)—have been critically praised and highly successfully.

M. Scott Momaday, a Kiowa writer, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969 for his novel *House Made of Dawn*, a breakthrough for Native American writing. Since then, Native American authors such as Paula Gunn Allen, Vine Deloria Jr., Michael Dorris, Louise Erdrich (whose wonderful novel *The Bingo Palace* I taught to my high school students for many years), Joy Harjo, William Least Heat Moon, Leslie Marmon Silko, and James Welch have made significant contributions to American letters. The popular and prolific Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie has created a kind of Native American literary renaissance on his own, winning prizes for his poetry, short stories, novels, and films as well as a National Book Award for young people's literature for his 2007 novel *The Absolutely True Story of a Part-Time Indian*, which has found its way onto many school book lists.

Hispanic or Latino American writers have also found an enthusiastic market in the United States. The first novel by a Mexican American author released by a major U.S. publisher was Jose Antonio Villareal's 1959 novel *Pocho*, which tells the story of a young boy from Mexico coming with his migrant farm laborer father and large family to the United States during the Depression. The book caught a second wind in 1970 during a flowering of Chicano culture that also saw the publication of Rudolfo Anaya's 1972 novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, which has since become part of the American high school canon. So has Mexican American writer Sandra Cisneros' 1984 novel *The House on Mango Street*. Oscar Hijuelos, the child of Cuban immigrant parents, was the first American-born Hispanic to win a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his exuberant 1989 novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. Other best-selling works by Hispanic or Latino Americans have included Chilean American writer Isabel Allende's 1982 novel *The House of Spirits*, Dominican American writer Julia Alvarez's 1991 novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Cuban-born writer Christina Garcia's 1992 *Dreaming in Cuban*, and Dominican American writer Junot Diaz's stunning 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Displaying the trickiness of ethnic characterization, some colleges and anthologies have defined a separate Caribbean American literary experience. This classification scheme would take the Spanish-speaking Cuban and Dominican writers from the list above and sort them with writers such as St. Lucia-born poet Derek Walcott (winner of the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature and a part-time resident of the United States), Antigua-born Jamaica Kincaid and Haiti-born Edwidge Danticat, the latter two of whom immigrated to the United States in their respective youths and have been popular and critically regarded fiction writers.

Asian American writers have had a huge effect on popular culture and have seen their works added to school book lists. John Okada's *No-No Boy*, written in 1957, was the first novel published by a Japanese American author. It received little attention until it was rediscovered by a new generation of Asian American writers (most notably Lawson Inada and Frank Chin) and republished in 1976. Recently, I've seen it on some high school syllabuses. Inada and Chin were also responsible for *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* in 1974, which introduced me to a rich world of writing in my early high school teaching days. Maxine Hong Kingston's 1975 genre-breaking memoir *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* is one of the most influential nonfiction works produced in America, and surveys have shown it to be the most widely taught book by a living writer in U.S. colleges. (I used this genre-breaking memoir with AP seniors for many years.)

In the past couple of decades, Chinese American writers have produced many other works that have sold like hotcakes, many of which are being taught in high school and college classes, such as Amy Tan's 1989 *The Joy Luck Club*, Frank Chin's 1991 *Donald Duk: A Novel*, Fae Myenne Ng's 1993 *Bone*, and Gish Jen's 1996 *Mona in the Promised Land*. Other Asian writers occasionally found in school curricula include Japanese Americans Garrett Hongo, Joy Kogawa Obasan and Lawson Fusao Inada, Korean American Chang-rae Lee, Cambodian American Linda Crew, and Vietnamese American Le Ly Hayslip.

The recent immigration wave of highly educated citizens from South Asia, most notably India, has nurtured a number of popular Indian American writers, including Bharati Mukherjee (a University of California, Berkeley, English professor, who wrote the popular 1989 novel *Jasmine* among many others) and Jhumpa Lahiri, the youngest-ever recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction with her 1999 story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*.

American writers with a Middle East ancestry have also recently found their way onto school book lists. Among these are Afghan immigrant Khaled Hosseini with his 2003 blockbuster *The Kite Runner* and the poet Naomi Shihab Nye, with Palestinian roots. More recently Farah Ahmed, an immigrant from Afghanistan who lost a leg to a land mine as a child and family members to violence, wrote (when she was in high school) a memoir that some teachers are using, *The Other Side of the Sky*.

Though this sorting of American authors into ethnic or regional categories may seem clumsy or offensive (and some writers reject the idea entirely, including Bharati Mukherjee, who roundly rejects the "Indian American" label I pasted on her two paragraphs earlier), multicultural criticism has encouraged teachers to consider cultural background as a factor in choosing books for canons and curricula, as well as a critical tool. A multicultural perspective adds a new set of questions to a reader's repertoire: In what ways have writers from previously excluded or oppressed groups found their voices? Have they developed alternative literary identities or traditions or added to older ones? What new stories do these authors have to share? What new perspectives on the American narrative do they offer? What are their commonalities and differences? How might different communities of readers respond in different ways to the same text?

A multicultural curriculum has many classroom benefits. With a wider range of reading choices, our students with their rich diversity of backgrounds have a better chance of not only finding stories and poems that validate their experience but also stories and poems that offer a different perspective from their own. And the extraordinarily popular reception of multicultural literature in the marketplace—where no one is forcing readers to buy any works other than those that intrigue them—show that readers are interested in hearing new voices, traveling to new places, and being introduced to new cultures.

Perhaps most important, exposure to multicultural literature reminds us and our students of how much we have in common with people from different circumstances, times, and places.

**African American criticism** is the ancestor of all multicultural criticism—not surprising given the long history of black people in America and the particularly rich, influential, and internationally acclaimed contributions of African Americans to the literary arts.

African American literary criticism has had a number of consequential projects.

One has been demanding equal opportunity to sit at the table of American letters. A few black writers found their way into print in the earlier years of our republic, such as the colonial poet Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784). And during the decades-long national strife over slavery that culminated in the Civil War, slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* became popular reading and were seen as crucial to the abolition movement. But in both these examples, disbelief of many white readers that blacks could even read, let alone compose a book, was so high that prefaces were often necessary from white patrons testifying to the identity of the authors and the truth of the stories—apparently so readers wouldn’t think they’d been ghost-written by whites.

This sort of dismissal combined with active exclusion in many forms—from the denial of literacy in slavery days to the segregation and inequality of schools through the 1950s to the closed doors of the publishing industry—made African American authorship a rare and daunting occurrence. The outpouring of art during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s cracked that door open, and Americans began to have a chance to read the rich output of varied artists, including Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer, many of whose poems and stories we can still find today in literature anthologies for our classrooms.

On the heels of that era, two significant novelists whose works have also become part of the school canon wrote about the heavy costs of racism but in different ways: Richard Wright (1908–1960) created works—including his short-story collection *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), his novel *Native Son* (1940), and his autobiography *Black Boy* (1945)—that portrayed in straightforward language the gritty realities of black American life in both the Jim Crow-era South and the impoverished urban ghettos of the North. Ralph Ellison (1913–1994) wrote a complex modernist novel in his masterpiece *Invisible Man* (1953), lush with the polyrhythms of jazz, a collage of ambiguity, surrealism, metaphor, and tough reality.

Since the cultural explosion of the 1960s, African Americans have been among the most prominent and successful of all American writers. Our most recent American winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature is Toni Morrison. Many teachers have incorporated into their classrooms the fictions of Morrison, James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara, Ernest J. Gaines, Paule Marshall, Walter Dean Myers, Gloria Naylor, Ann Petry (whose 1946 novel about Harlem, *The Street*, was the first book authored by a black woman to top sales of a million copies), and Alice Walker; the poetry of Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Rita Dove, Nikki Giovanni, Yusef Komunyakaa, Sonia Sanchez, and Quincy Troupe; the nonfiction of Claude Brown, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Alex Haley, Barack Obama, and Malcolm X; and the plays of Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson, among many others.

Another project of African American criticism has been a reexamination of texts in the traditional canon with an eye on their representations of the African American experience. Are black characters invisible? Are they stereotyped? Are they complex and authentic and representative of a range of people? To what extent are any black characters projections of white fears, needs, and conflicts? Are racist ideologies reinforced or challenged?

A third project of African American criticism has been to explore and define a particularly African American literary tradition. The remarkable scholar, writer, and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) defined way back in the late 1800s a particular sense of “double consciousness” required of blacks in the United States for the tricky negotiations between two different cultural traditions, the African and the American. A kind of “two-ness” is caused, Du Bois thought, by a series of social pressures felt only by blacks: the need to always see oneself through the eyes of others, the heightened awareness of both one’s own blackness and the whiteness around one, the pressure of having one cultural self at home and another in white-dominated public spaces, and the need to master two languages, both African American vernacular English and mass media English.

Manifestations of this double consciousness, which is both a burden and a skill, find their way into African American literature. So scholars such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. talk about the African American writer working between two traditions, that of Western European written culture into which they were forcibly transplanted and African oral culture that survived in songs, in legends, and in speech patterns. Black writers have to decide whether their work should aim at an audience of black folks or white folks or both, whether their metaphors and myths should draw on European sources or African sources or both, whether their language should be rooted in the black vernacular or TV English or both, or whether all these issues are totally irrelevant and distracting to their individual artistic vision.

African American criticism has explored these decisions and other aspects of writing by black authors—the recurrence of important historical themes (from enslavement to Jim Crow existence to northern migration to urban ghetto life), archetypal figures (from tricksters to conjurers to matriarchs), and structures (from folktale to blues music patterns). The bottom-line assumption is that African American writers may have different strategies,

themes, and aims, and therefore that old European critical standards may not quite fit them. (Actually, new European critical standards may not, either. Among some African American critics, there has been some grousing about postmodern ideas such as the deconstructionist denial of any canon, just when black writers have found their place in it.)

When looking at work by African Americans, the main question from this perspective may be, What can this text uniquely teach us about the unique African American experience?

**Postcolonial criticism** is a newer form of thinking about literature, its focus beginning with the historic period from the late 1800s through the early 1900s, when European nations raced to lay claim to the vast majority of the earth's surface through military, cultural, religious, and economic domination, and the long aftermath of that process that continues to this day. Colonization and the subsequent decolonization that began in the 1950s and 1960s has had a profound impact on huge numbers of the globe's citizens. Our contemporary map is still dotted with artificial entities created by colonizing powers with little regard for local realities, including nations such as Iraq (cobbled together by the British from various regional empires in Mesopotamia) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (a creation by the Belgians from a huge mix of disparate ethnic, cultural, and linguistic tribes) that are still today experiencing the violent results of that process. From early contacts with explorers through the slave trade through colonial exploitation through resistance through liberation and through subsequent postdeparture politics, people around the world have had to deal with complex issues of displacement, oppression, identity, complicity, power, race, and class. Postcolonial scholarship in general has sought to untangle all the knotty issues that have accompanied these historical processes. The resulting dislocations and energies have been captured in many forms of art, including literature. Postcolonial literary criticism focuses on this rich vein of literature.

Sometimes the subject of study is the literary representations of colonized peoples by writers from the colonizing powers, representations that often distorted their reality, demeaned their culture, and dehumanized them, all in a way serving to justify their exploitation. One of the seminal texts in postcolonial studies is the influential book *Orientalism* (1978) by Palestinian American theorist and longtime Columbia University literature professor Edward Said (sigh-EED). In this and other of his works, Said (1935–2003) dissected Western cultural attitudes toward the Middle East and Asia, particularly the European habit of inaccurately viewing “the Orient” as an exotic, sensual, irrational, mysterious place full of inscrutable *others*, in contrast to what was seen as the civilized norm of European culture. Viewing vast parts of the world through this eyepiece made it easier, in Said's opinion, for European leaders to subjugate other cultures in the East and for European writers to misinterpret, appropriate, and exploit other cultures, particularly when the voices of people themselves were largely missing from bookshelves.

This leads to the more common subject of study by postcolonial scholars, the promotion and examination of the rich explosion of literary output from formerly colonized peoples. The first goal was to make sure that the narrative about colonization

gets told through the eyes of its victims as well as its perpetrators. As Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe has expressed it, “The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reasons for this had to do with the need to justify the slave trade and slavery . . . This continued until the Africans themselves, in the middle of the twentieth century, took into their own hands the telling of their story” (2000). Or, as he put it more colorfully: “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter” (1994). Achebe has been a key figure in the dissemination of postcolonial literature as general editor of the influential African Writer Series of Heinemann Books.

Another aspect of postcolonial literary criticism has been an exploration of issues postcolonial writers face. One issue is the dynamic between place and displacement, the experience of uprootedness and subsequently trying to find both one’s old home and one’s new home. Another issue is the alienation caused by cultural loss and denigration and the work of finding new cultural touchstones. Another issue is language. Many postcolonial writers work in the languages of their colonizers—English, French, Spanish—and are at times criticized for doing so.

The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o and the Sudanese writer Taban Lo Liyong fired off a manifesto at the University of Nairobi in the late 1960s, “On the Abolition of the English Department,” that slammed colonial languages as a tool of oppression and promoted homegrown languages as the best tool of expression. Chinua Achebe and others have defended their use of global languages such as English on the grounds that they give colonized people from differing linguistic backgrounds a way to talk to one another and they broaden readership. At the same time, these writers also acknowledge the difficulty of trying to express indigenous ways of thinking with no equivalents in a conqueror’s language.

This negotiating between the tongues, myths, and storytelling styles of home cultures and those of imposed cultures has created what Indian postcolonial theorist and Harvard professor Homi K. Bhabha calls “hybridity,” a kind of multivocal stance that offers not only challenges but also perhaps some advantages to postcolonial writers. Chinua Achebe himself is a great example. His first novel *Things Fall Apart*, written in 1958, is often considered the granddaddy of all modern African fiction; it has been translated into almost fifty languages, has sold over eight million copies around the world, and is a staple of many school book lists, including mine. (For many years, I have had all my senior English students read *Things Fall Apart*.) One of the remarkable aspects of this novel—as with Achebe’s other fictions—is its mash-up of traditional Igbo and colonial English literary traditions. Western readers’ expectations about how novels usually work can be dislocated a bit by Achebe’s use of moves from Igbo oral tradition: a kind of formal syntax that the author uses to replicate as best as possible the rhythms of Igbo speech, a lavish use of Igbo folktales and proverbs and idioms, an easy acceptance of the supernatural, an emphasis on communal character as much as individual character,

and a more subtle plotting than the constantly rising action we often find in traditional Western novels. Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, both enacts and disrupts the archetypal individualistic win-the-quest-and-ride-into-the-sunset hero of Western literature. Achebe thus stretches the boundaries of the English novel and expands our sense of all the ways to tell a human story.

Notwithstanding all the elements that tweak their expectations, most of my students report being captivated by this novel. A comment by Allen Webb in his book *Literature and Lives* helps clarify for me why this is so: “While these [issues] may differ from the experiences of many of our students, finding one’s voice in a foreign medium, struggling with contradictions between home and school life, addressing discrimination and inequality, attempting to understand and come to terms with national cultures and identities are issues relevant to ‘First World’ as well as ‘Third World’ students. The connections that our students are able to make between their own lives and people in the ‘Third World’ are, given the separations between us, especially precious” (2001, 93). As with all multicultural literature, these works help young readers make connections with disparate peoples, shatter stereotypes, complicate images, increase cultural knowledge about other societies, and humanize the once-feared *other*.

The promotion of this literature is not just a matter of political correctness. The postcolonial viewpoint has been a powerful source of literary creativity over the past half-century and has proved to be an extremely popular genre—if we can call it that—of writing. We can walk into any library or bookstore and find scores of books from a postcolonial perspective, including works from prominent international writers, such as the novelist and essayist V. S. Naipaul (of Indian ancestry, born and raised in Trinidad, educated in England), the novelist and short-story writer Nadine Gordimer (from an English-speaking Jewish family in South Africa), the poet Derek Walcott (born on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, descended from African slaves, splits time between homes in the Caribbean and the United States), and the playwright and memoirist Wole Soyinka (from Nigeria, educated in England, spent time in exile in United States). All these border-crossing writers produce their works in English, and all have won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

I heard a biologist say once that the most interesting and significant interactions in nature happen at borders—where forest meets meadow, for example, where the interchanges and transitions in flora and fauna are rich, lively, diversity-expanding and healthy for all life. In much the same way, Homi Bhabha has talked about borders being places of the most meaningful postcolonial transactions, places of conflict, to be sure, but also of connection and new learning. Perhaps this is why the postcolonial perspective has produced such a surfeit of literary richness that has been received so well by world readers.

Good questions for readers and students are posed by postcolonial criticism:

Regarding works by writers from a European or colonizing perspective, do they consciously or unconsciously dehumanize, demean, romanticize, or distort the cultures

and peoples they describe? Do they present authentic, complex characters or stereotypes? Do they justify the project of colonizing others? Do they question it? Do they include voices of the colonized as well as the colonizers? Do they regularly use the reductive binary vocabulary of oppression—West/East, Occident/Orient, First World/Third World, civilized/barbarous, rational/inscrutable?

Regarding works by writers from a colonized perspective, how have they found and used their voices? How have they negotiated the dynamic between the languages and storytelling patterns of their home cultures and those of the colonizing powers? What indigenous literary traditions are included? Have they had to develop new strategies for bridging the cultural gaps? What new stories or perspectives do they have to offer Western readers? Do they comment directly or indirectly on the effects of colonialism? What do they teach us about local particularities and universal commonalities?

A few times, I've run across thinkers who suggest expanding the idea of postcolonial to *postnational*, to accommodate the increasing internationalizing of culture during an era of globalization. Think of all the writers who seem to straddle or transcend national identity, all while staying grounded in their home cultures: Salman Rushdie from India but schooled in England and a global traveler, Gabriel García Márquez from Colombia but a longtime resident of Spain and Mexico, Azar Nafisi from Iran who was schooled in England and the United States where she wrote her best-selling *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

Many modern writers do seem to live mostly in what Nafisi has called “The Republic of the Imagination.” Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) (born in Russia, spirited to England to avoid the Russian Revolution, a resident of Germany and then France until he fled to the United States with the rise of the Nazis, author of some of the greatest novels in English, which was his third or fourth language) once said that the ultimate identity papers for writers are their books.

Teaching not only postcolonial literature but more world literature in general—as I perceive more American high schools did when I began my teaching career in the early 1970s than do today—might be one remedy for connecting our increasingly diverse student population to our curriculum. Even in my not-very-diverse state of Oregon, I've had students in my class in the past decade who were from Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, China, Japan, Okinawa, Pakistan, India, Iran, Israel, Argentina, Kazakhstan, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Somalia, Peru, Mexico, Croatia, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic—and those are just students I can think of off the top of my head. These students have had wonderful stories to share from their home cultures (I used to give extra credit for students who'd bring in folktales from their traditions that I could use in my class) and moving stories about navigating between cultures. Their interactions with native-born students are a big part of the American story—we are a relatively new nation, populated largely by recent immigrants, after all—and literature can be part of our ongoing conversation about our history.

In sum, postcolonial criticism raises our awareness about the damages of colonization as well as gets us thinking about an awareness of other humans on this shrinking



globe. Through a study of postcolonial literature our students can be reminded of our fascinating and precious local differences as well as the human family's comforting essential commonalities. As Naomi Shihab Nye noted on the cover of *This Same Sky*, her wonderful anthology of poems from around the world, "Listen to their words which join [these poets] one to another, for this same sky joins them to us."

**Marxist criticism** is based on the ideas of German philosopher Karl Marx (1818—1883), who maintained that economic systems ultimately structure all human relations and societies. From the first line of his explosive 1848 *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx conceived of human history as the history of struggles between economic classes. Where Darwin saw biological imperatives and Freud saw psychological drives as primary motivators of human behavior, Marx saw *materialism*—the complex economics and sociology surrounding the production and distribution of resources—as the main force behind our behavior and our history. And he believed the long, seesawing historic march from feudalism to bourgeoisie capitalism to socialism could lead in only one inevitable direction: to a utopian communist state.

Given the break-up of the communist bloc in Europe and the frequency of communism's connection to oppressive regimes, it's reasonable to ask why this approach is considered viable at all. (Students of mine have asked me this.) To many, especially in the United States with its enduring belief in capitalism, Marxism seems a failed theory. The topic is anathema to many Americans, and I imagine in some school situations even broaching the subject might be troublesome for a teacher. Marxist critics answer that this theory, regardless of its use and misuse in the political sphere, still gives us a thought-provoking and meaningful way to analyze and understand history, current events, and artistic products, including literature. Marx noted that art has a place in the revolutionary process of improving the human condition by showing how humans have experienced their conditions in life and protested against them.

Some Marxist analyses have dealt with the pure economics of literary production—viewing literature as not only creative activity but also as an industry, books as not only artifacts of meaning but also commodities sold for a profit, writers as not only creators but producers. When I'm rapt in the pages of a novel that I feel I have chosen freely to buy and read, captured by the free-flowing imagination of a favored writer, I don't usually care to think about this aspect of the book, but a Marxist would say that nothing in a capitalist system is free. (This point of view might best be expressed by the old American saying that of course the press is free here, to anyone who owns one.) Part of a book's existence is inextricably tied up with the organization of the publishing industry, the cultivation and manipulation of reading audiences, the calculated privileging of some voices and suppressing of others. In this analysis, we have to acknowledge the *commodification* of literature—that is, the fact that there's a system considering its market value above all others and confusing the critical question, "Is it a good book?" with the marketing question, "Will it sell?" (Note how often in the chapter on political criticism that I fell prey to this habit by mentioning the best-selling status of books I

discuss as a way to legitimize them.) This topic is not one that has ever gotten much traction in my classroom, however. It has tended to take the discussion away from the individual texts at hand toward shorter, less-engaging conversations about economics, politics, advertising, and manufactured tastes that have never gotten too far.

Let's focus more on what Marxist criticism has to say about individual literary works, particularly how a text can be both a product of its culture and a comment on its culture.

One kind of chirping from this critical perch is to consider how a society's values—what longtime Duke University professor Fredric Jameson has called *the political unconscious*—are embedded in a text. The central assumption is that a book cannot be separated from its historical context. The notion that the art of a given era reflects its dominant ideology, called *reflection theory* by some Russian scholars, has long been a cornerstone of Marxist literary criticism. For example, as I noted in the chapter on historical criticism, the Hungarian thinker Georg Lukács (1885–1971) described how the rise of the novel, the literary form that celebrates the individual protagonist, reflects the rise of individual-oriented middle-class bourgeois culture in Europe.

But there's more to the process: as any literary work reflects a certain ideology, it also often promotes it, whether consciously or not. In analyzing why the supposedly inevitable proletariat revolution predicted by Marxists wasn't occurring everywhere in the early twentieth century, Italian communist and political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) decided that capitalism's durability was not only maintained by economic and political coercion but maybe even more powerfully by cultural factors. Using all the artifacts of culture—education, religion, art—the bourgeois middle class was able to inculcate a sense of capitalist values (such as the “American dream” that promises riches to everyone who works hard) even among the proletariat working class left behind by those values. Gramsci called this indoctrination *cultural hegemony*, the attempt by a dominant class to seize the defining cultural narrative. Our notions of what is objective, true, natural, and right are just that—socially constructed notions rather than universal realities, notions promoted by those who want to preserve their positions of privilege. Writers are no less captives of this cultural narrative than anyone else. Thus, their creations will usually reinforce the status quo.

In light of this class analysis, one of the critic's main jobs is to analyze the historical and ideological subtexts of a book's content, structure, and language—an act of historical criticism with a bite. So we find Mike Gold (1893–1967), the sharp-tongued author, literary critic, and communist, criticizing many of the icons of American literature. From his position as editor of the leftist publication *The New Masses* in the 1930s or as a columnist for the Communist Party USA's newspaper *Daily Worker*, Gold lambasted authors that he felt betrayed the working class, glorified the upper class or capitalism, or concentrated on aesthetic issues rather than social issues. Among others, he derided Gertrude Stein as a “literary idiot” whose experimental writing was irrelevant to working people (Gold 1936, 23), slammed Ernest Hemingway as a bourgeois writer who ignored social problems for “the amours and drinking bouts of Americans of income who rot in

European cafes,” and described a Thornton Wilder novel as peopled with “wan ghosts” undergoing “little lavender tragedies”—thus totally disconnected from the suffering of most Depression-era folks (Murphy 1991, 65).

Marxists are obviously clear that literary study as well as literature should be deeply engaged in the social, political, and economic realities surrounding the works that we read, though scholars and teachers and even readers often act as if these aspects are irrelevant or nonexistent. For example, when my classes read Arthur Miller’s great 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*, the student-led discussions often seem to center first on Willy Loman’s personality—his grandiose dreams, his stubbornness, his deluded misperception of himself—and on the complex web of interactions within his family. Willy’s knotted relationships with his two sons seem to have a particularly strong effect on many high school readers. I just checked out some commercial materials about *Death of a Salesman* available to teachers, and they were all focused on the same psychological and familial themes with some discussion of the play’s innovative structure and setting.

A Marxist reading of *Death of a Salesman* would stretch the discussion considerably, asking us to consider the play in its wider social context. No work of art is marooned from its history. Thus, students would be asked to ponder also the material and historic realities of the society in which the Loman family drama plays out. What powerful social forces cause Willy to believe his entire identity and self-worth are a matter of his economic success—to the extent that he overlooks entirely how much his wife and children need and love him? Why is his version of the American dream so focused on hitting it rich, on getting ahead even if it’s by unethical means, on being like his predatory brother Ben who has purportedly built his fortune on some kind of crooked scheme in Africa? What can we say about an economic system that allows the Lomans to run up their credit on things they can’t afford, about a company that has so little loyalty to Willy after thirty years that it puts him on commission and eventually fires him, about a society that is so dog-eat-dog as to put a mentally disintegrating man into a tailspin without a pension? For a Marxist critic, the literary text is an opportunity for a critique of the damaging effects of a materialist society.

We’re not limited to more contemporary works, either. We can explore an older work such as *Hamlet* through a Marxist lens, examining social hierarchies and class roles in Shakespeare’s play. We can talk about the ideologies the play promotes—for example, as one of my students said once, “Royalty really ruled in those days!” We can look at the gravediggers’ besotted conversation about the special privileges of the well born in relation to everyday folk. In all literature, even that which doesn’t directly address class and power concerns, there’s a dialogue at play about these issues that will unearth social conditions worth discussing.

In some works of literature, of course, the status quo is challenged, the dominant ideology is confronted, the point of view of the working class is thoroughly and fairly presented. These works, from writers who have committed their art to the cause of

the proletariat, are to be prized. Terry Eagleton says that the best realistic fiction, in its commitment to conveying the living sniff of humankind, encourages us to become vitally engaged in other people's predicaments. If the material conditions of characters are presented fully, the novel has moral force—that is, the potential to raise readers' consciousness about issues of class and injustice and to move readers to political action to improve those conditions. Thus, literature has a utilitarian purpose—it is practical. Criticism that ignores literature's usefulness, that skirts political issue, and that accepts the status quo, is useless.

In the final analysis, then, Marxist critics judge the quality of a work on the extent to which it promotes or impedes progress toward a just, equitable society, which from this point of view is a socialist society.

They ask questions like these: Does this work of literature show how characters have been shaped by their economic conditions? What is the role of power and money in the work? What does it reveal about the social and economic conditions of the time in which it was written and the time in which it is set? Does it reveal and condemn oppressive social and economic forces and ideologies? Does it raise our consciousness about the plight of workers, about class issues, about power relations, about injustice? Are characters from all social levels equally well portrayed? Does the protagonist defend the dominant values of society or rebel against them? Does the work critique inhumane social conditions or reinforce them, consciously or otherwise? Does it present any solutions, any alternate visions? How might this work affect or improve society?

As Eagleton says in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, “unless we can relate past literature, however indirectly, to the struggle of men and women against exploitation, we shall not fully understand our own present and so will be less able to change it effectively . . . [and] less able to *read* texts or to produce those art forms which might make for a better art and a better society. Marxist criticism is not just an alternative technique for interpreting *Paradise Lost* or *Middlemarch*. It is part of our liberation from oppression” (1976, 76).

The idealistic goal of this form of political criticism is this liberation.

**Lesbian, gay, and queer criticisms** are angles of literary approach that emerged in the 1990s. As with other forms of political criticism, these ideas may be difficult for some teachers to introduce into high school classrooms, depending on the policies of the school and attitudes of the community. However, they do offer another set of insights into literary texts. In addition, they have the goal of fighting bigotry.

Ken Lindblom, editor of *English Journal*, the monthly magazine of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), addressed this in his introduction to a recent issue devoted to “Sexual Identity and Gender Variance.” (This issue—a superb resource for classroom ideas, by the way—was a response to the 2007 resolution by NCTE to strengthen teacher knowledge of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, issues.)

Lindblom wrote,

*Homophobia is a kind of bigotry that takes many forms. Stark, tragic examples of homophobia make the news, and seem to do so on a disturbingly regular basis. But there are quieter, more insidious forms of homophobia, and they are just as dangerous because they enable the homophobic views that lead to the news-making tragedies. In many schools and homes, young people might be punished for calling someone a “fag,” but are students really encouraged to think and talk about homosexuality? In fact, even among some otherwise very nice people, the topic of homosexuality is considered if not taboo, then simply impolite. While this attitude might enable a certain level of “tolerance”—a term many find somewhat disrespectful—it certainly doesn’t encourage acceptance, understanding, and appreciation. We all deserve better than merely to tolerate or to be tolerated. This begins with education. (2009, 11)*

Literature is a great educational tool for cultivating acceptance, understanding, and appreciation.

The main activities of gay and lesbian or queer criticism have been to examine the representations of homosexual, bisexual, or transgendered characters in literature as well as to consider the identities of lesbian and gay writers and the influence of their sexual orientations on their works. (By the way, another reasonable question of students is why some gay scholars have chosen to use the old homophobic slur word “queer” for this approach. The answer is generally that the term has been reappropriated by gays, turning a term of insult into one of pride so that heterosexists won’t be ceded the power to define or demean the gay and lesbian experience.)

One interesting aspect of this literary approach is that while so many writers of color have had to fight to have their voices included in the literary canon and the school curriculum, many traditionally canonized and popular writers have been homosexual or bisexual. A partial list would include Edward Albee, W. H. Auden, James Baldwin, Elizabeth Bishop, Truman Capote, John Cheever, Hart Crane, H. D./Hilda Doolittle, E. M. Forster, Andre Gide, Allen Ginsberg, Christopher Isherwood, Tony Kushner, Amy Lowell, Somerset Maugham, Carson McCullers, James Merrill, Wilfred Owen, Marcel Proust, Adrienne Rich, Gertrude Stein, Gore Vidal, Thornton Wilder, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams, and Virginia Woolf, and could perhaps be expanded to include Lord Byron, Willa Cather, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Langston Hughes, Henry James, Sarah Orne Jewett, Christopher Marlowe, Alfred Tennyson, and even William Shakespeare, though many arguments have occurred about the sexual orientations among this latter group of writers.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950–2009), a literary theorist, professor at schools from Dartmouth to Duke, and pioneer of gay studies, addressed this fact in her 1990 work *Epistemology of the Closet*, a founding text of gay and lesbian studies. The problem, she

noted, is not that gays have been excluded from the canon and classroom. Rather, it's that their sexual orientation has not been treated as part of the possible set of topics of discussion surrounding the work. (I studied most of the writers listed above in high school and as a college English major in the late 1960s, and I can recall no mention whatsoever at that time of any writer's sexual orientation and its possible effect on the work. And as often as I've taught in high school James Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues," Shakespeare's sonnets, Wilfred Owen's and Langston Hughes's poems, or Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I must admit I've seldom raised the matter myself.)

There are many possible reasons for this. As noted in other chapters, in the biographical and formalist sections in particular, some thinkers believe that any information about an author is irrelevant to the interpretation, analysis, and evaluation of literary works—or worse than irrelevant, distracting. Some would argue—some homosexual writers such as Tennessee Williams themselves have, in fact—that sexual identity is irrelevant to artistic production. In addition, political pressures, parental or administrative opposition, or personal beliefs may preclude teachers from bringing sexual orientation into the classroom conversation. Often, however, it may be that teachers and students are simply just too uncomfortable with the topic to broach it. In any case, Sedgwick believes that such avoidance is intellectually dishonest and also that it gives passive or active support to homophobia.

What does gay and lesbian criticism undertake to accomplish?

One project, as with feminist and multicultural approaches, is to identify and censure any limited, stereotyped, or one-dimensional portraits of LGBT people and any covert or overt homophobia or prejudice expressed in literature and criticism. An example might be Mike Gold's critique of Thornton Wilder in the previous section on Marxist criticism. Could Gold's enraged, nasty comment about Wilder's "little lavender tragedies" be less a comment on Wilder's class consciousness than an example of coded gay bashing? And much has been written about Ernest Hemingway's frequent dismissal of gays in his fictions. For example, the character Jake Barnes in Hemingway's 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*, whose genital wound from World War I has left him impotent, is contemptuous of the homosexuals that hang around Brett Ashley, the woman he loves but with whom he cannot consummate his relationship. Though he has much in common with these homosexual men (mostly Brett's affection and her notion that they are "safe" companions), Barnes despises Brett's gay coterie and wants to slug one, even though he says he should be tolerant. Gay scholars have suggested this hostility, also displayed in other Hemingway works, is an example of repressed homosexuality. Because Hemingway's own masculinity was in crisis, according to this point of view, he overcompensated with his famously macho swagger. As feminist critics have noted, there are many forms of sexual discrimination in our society, and calling them out is one step in raising people's awareness of such bias.

Another project of gay and lesbian criticism has been the support of texts treating gay and lesbian issues directly. There is a growing body of young adult literature

dealing with LGBT themes, some of which teachers are using in classrooms. (Find a copy of that March 2009 edition of *English Journal* for many teachable book ideas.) Alice Walker's popularly taught 1982 novel *The Color Purple*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award, includes a positively portrayed lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug Avery. And there are plenty of such works having success in the general marketplace.

As an avid cartoonist in my youth, I'm a fan of the relatively new genre of graphic novels, and on my shelf is what I consider one of the best-ever examples, Alison Bechdel's stunning *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. This 2006 memoir-in-drawings is centered on Bechdel's coming-of-age issues, primarily dealing with her father's closeted homosexuality and her own open lesbianism and the way their shared love of literature (her father was a high school English teacher) was a link to understanding. *Fun Home* made the *New York Times* best-seller and Best Books of the Year lists.

Tony Kushner's innovative two-part play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* won back-to-back Tony Awards in 1993 and 1994 as the nation's Best Play as well as the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, and was subsequently made into an acclaimed HBO film. Moises Kaufman's popular play *The Laramie Project*, about the murder in 1988 of Matthew Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming, has been performed by high school drama departments—and probably censored just about as often. Jeffrey Eugenides' 2002 novel *Middlesex*, which deals with the character of Calliope—or Cal—Stephanides, who occupies a complex middle ground between male and female and the accompanying gender identities, also won a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. I have heard of teachers using all these works in their classrooms with high school students. They're examples of the way lesbian and gay themes have become part of the contemporary literature scene.

Another project of gay and lesbian criticism has been to consider the influence of writers' sexual orientations on their works. One thread of this thinking is the sense that gay writers' experiences in so many hostile societies, where they have been marginalized and shunned, has given them a unique outsider's insights on the human condition. Might Oscar Wilde's absolutely hilarious skewering of upper-class British courting rituals in *The Importance of Being Earnest* be considered in the light of his homosexual perspective? (Actually, Wilde had to suffer more than just social censure. He spent two years in jail, from 1895 to 1897, for "gross indecency," a euphemism for homosexual behavior, which probably led to his early death from illness.) Walt Whitman's exuberant embrace of all experience and his sense of spiritual union with all humankind has been likewise regarded as an expression of his homosexual viewpoint.

Yet another project of gay and lesbian criticism has been the unearthing of hidden, ignored, or dismissed homoerotic subtexts in many works. Because in many historical times and places homosexuality has been taboo, there are many closeted or repressed themes of same-sex love to be found in literature, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Ferretting these out can offer new and illuminating (albeit sometimes controversial) readings of old texts.

For example, a work often found in high school literature anthologies for many decades is Willa Cather's 1905 short story "Paul's Case," which has frequently been interpreted as a tragic portrait of a sensitive, misunderstood artist who doesn't fit into the colorless, soul-numbing suburban world of his parents. However, it can also be fruitfully considered as a coded picture of a young gay man rejected by a heterosexist society. And Cather's hard-to-figure character Jim Burden, the narrator of her 1918 novel *My Ántonia*, has been analyzed as a symbolic embodiment of Cather's own lesbian desire.

In similar fashion, some critics have interpreted Tennessee Williams's memorable character Blanche DuBois in his 1947 play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (winner of the 1948 Pulitzer Prize) as a flamboyant representation of Williams's own ambivalences as a gay man in a homophobic era. In the play, Blanche reveals that she was once married to a man whom she discovered to be a closeted gay; her disgust led him to kill himself. Blanche could represent the tensions in Williams's own life between self-acceptance and self-rejection as well as other strains between romance and lust, hope and cruel reality, age and youth. That Blanche feels out of place mirrors the conflicts Williams may have experienced in his own life as a Southerner in the North and a gay man in a homophobic era. (For the record, Williams himself found such analyses ridiculous. In a 1975 *New York Times* interview with Mel Gussow, Williams said, "The most stupid thing said about my writing is that my heroines are disguised transvestites. Absolutely and totally none of them are anything but women . . . I understand women, and I can write about them. It's true my heroines often speak for me. That doesn't make them transvestites . . . It's bad criticism to say I can't put an authentic female character on stage . . . I do not have a . . . homosexual, a gay audience. I write for an audience" [49].)

Homosexual subtexts have been discerned by gay and lesbian critics in texts written by overtly homosexual writers, too, such as that noted in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* above. Others have analyzed the complex relationship, careening between love and hatred, between Ralph and Jack in William Golding's iconic 1954 novel *The Lord of the Flies* as the playing out of an unconscious homosexual attraction.

In summary, then, gay and lesbian criticism addresses questions such as these: How are human sexuality and sexual identity used in this literary work? How do men define *masculinity* and women *femininity*? Is heterosexuality the only kind of human relationship portrayed? Is the work consciously or unconsciously homophobic? Does it reveal the operations of prejudice regarding sexual orientation? Does the work portray any homosexual characters or relationships? Does the work contribute to our knowledge of gay and lesbian experience and history, including the history of homophobic bias? Does the work, particularly if written in a time when open homosexuality would've been unacceptable, carry any masked references to the gay or lesbian experience by homosexual writers? Is there any repressed homosexual desire or conflict expressed



in works by seemingly heterosexual writers? Does the work complicate the binary definitions of *heterosexual* and *homosexual*?

Steven Lynn has written of the ultimate goal for gay and lesbian criticism: “Feminist, gay, and lesbian approaches have much in common and often appear in alliance. Their shared aim is to expose stereotypes and fight prejudice, dismantling oppressive ideas” (2001, 216–217). Or, as Massachusetts high school teacher Kristin M. Comment, who uses the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson to carefully raise LGBT issues in her classroom, says, “Talking about issues related to homosexuality in high school classrooms requires a good deal of sensitivity and even courage for most teachers . . . However, it has become essential that we include this subject matter because gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students both need and deserve to have their feelings and experiences validated. Moreover, most kids today are not just able to discuss these topics . . . they are also eager and excited to do so, and we need not look beyond our current curricula for opportunities to bring them up” (2009, 61).

**Ecocriticism**, sometimes called or **environmental literary criticism**, **ecopoetics**, or **biopoetics**, is a newer form of criticism with roots in the American West. An offshoot of the environmental movement, ecocriticism explores the relationship of literature and the natural world, aiming to get readers thinking about their interactions with the environment. It’s a rapidly growing field with its own professional organization, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which sponsors a journal, conferences, and scholarly work for those interested in the natural world and its representations in language and literature. Many universities have developed courses in literature and the environment. Closely related to similar trends in other academic fields, from green cultural studies to sustainability initiatives in architecture, economics, and urban planning, ecocriticism is political insofar as its goal is to promote environmental change in both personal and social spheres—acting locally and thinking globally, as the slogan goes. In other words, for ecocritics the environment is not just an object of study but a cause. And literature is one means of forwarding that cause.

One project of ecocritics has been to bridge the gap between what British scientist C. P. Snow dubbed in his famous 1959 lecture “the two cultures” of the sciences and the humanities. The way schools are organized these days, there is often little interaction between the disciplines of English and science. But literary studies have long been enriched by interdisciplinary contributions; we have used the psychological ideas of Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung, the anthropological ideas of Sir James Frazer, the economic ideas of Karl Marx, and the historical ideas of Hippolyte Taine to help us see literature in fruitful new ways, so we can similarly use the scientific ideas of Charles Darwin and contemporary biologists, say ecocritics. In his pioneering 2003 book *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*, University of Oregon professor emeritus Glen A. Love encourages English teachers to be open to the many possible biological insights into literature. Ecological literacy can support critical literacy; scientific and poetic knowledge do not have to be mutually exclusive.

One activity of this approach is to ask what a work of literature teaches about the environment. Does it support our knowledge of the natural world? Does it raise environmental questions? If so, are these issues accurately represented?

Another activity is reflecting on the way nature is portrayed. As historical critics claim that literary works are deeply influenced by their *time*, ecocritics claim that they are no less deeply influenced by their *place*—the way nature is conceived through the work's setting. For example, there is a long *pastoral tradition* in literary art. Stemming from the Middle English word for “herdsmen,” *pastoral* has come to denote writing about bucolic country life—in particular a kind of idealized portrayal of rustic rural existence as innocent and idyllic, especially in contrast to life in the reeking city and scheming court. (For an excellent example, have your students take a look at Christopher Marlowe’s poem “The Passionate Shepherd.”) We can expand this tradition to include British Romantics such as William Wordsworth and American thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau. Starting from this pastoral writing, Love and other ecocritics have examined the way creative writers have conceptualized and shaped our ideas about the natural world.

Some writers, like the pastoralists, romanticize nature. This may reflect what some biologists consider our built-in biological affinity with nature, a bond that may govern our responses as powerfully as Carl Jung said the archetypes in our collective unconscious do. This romanticizing has benefits as well as its dangers. When literary works recapture for us a childhood enchantment with the natural world, or create a sense of wonder and awe at nature’s multiform beauty and bounty, or teach us to observe and understand nature more accurately, our alienation from the natural world can be breached and our sense of responsibility awakened. But nature can be dangerously overromanticized; it’s not always harmonious and wise, sylvan and bucolic. Natural forces are forces, neither inherently good or bad but forces to which we need to pay careful attention. For me, this is part of the message of Jon Krakauer’s moving 1996 nonfiction story *Into the Wild* (which English teachers at my high school have been using with students the past few years); when we treat nature as an always-benevolent force, we do so at our peril.

Some writers, however, demonize nature; think of all those stories in which the wilderness, forest, or jungle is a dark, evil place—from Grimm’s fairy tales to *Heart of Darkness*. Or consider that old chestnut of English textbooks that “man *versus* nature” is one of the essential conflicts found in all literature. An ecocritic points out that humans are actually *part of* nature, so this very conception sets up an unhealthy binary opposition. In fact, our current environmental crises may be caused in part by this attitude of seeing nature as separate from ourselves and the earth as something wild, dangerous, and untamed that needs to be channeled, dammed, fenced off, cultivated, and controlled by humans or, worse yet, exploited and plundered.

Another activity of ecocritics is based on evolutionary psychology, which examines human behavior in the light of its adaptive value; that is, how can we relate human choices to the kinds of behaviors that would’ve made us better able to survive in our ancient ancestral environment? How does the longtime human activity of telling and reading poems

and stories help us survive better? How can we interpret fictional characters' behavior in terms of its survival value? How are characters' behaviors motivated by their biology and by their landscape? What is the effect of the Mississippi River on Huck Finn's story, and how do we assess Mark Twain's deep understanding of that river (he was a highly trained riverboat pilot throughout most of his twenties) as essential to his fictional vision? Ecocritics study portrayals of wilderness and portrayals of people, then assess literary works based on their potential for raising moral questions about human interactions with nature, hoping to motivate readers to live a more environmentally mindful life.

Another project of ecocriticism is to give a boost to the literary legitimacy of the sometimes-undervalued genres of nature and environmental writing, a powerful strain in American letters when we think of the impact of the works of Thoreau and his successors: Edward Abbey, Angela Barrett, Wendell Barry, Rachel Carson, Robin Cody, Annie Dillard, David James Duncan, Gretel Ehrlich, William Kittredge, John Krakauer, Barry Lopez, Bill McKibben, John Muir, Michael Pollan, Robert Michael Pyle, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gary Snyder, Kim Stafford, Wallace Stegner, Terry Tempest Williams, and many others.

Some colleges offer writing courses in what I've seen referred to as ecocomposition (a graceless term to my ears)—that is, writing about the natural world. I used to do a delightful weeklong nature writing unit with summer school students, taking them outside first to observe a one-inch square piece of nature, then a one-foot square chunk, then a bigger piece yet (a tree, the sky), describing carefully and sketching in nature journals what they saw happening inside each frame. At the end of the week, we'd read some observational nature pieces—I always liked John Muir's description of the water ouzel, excerpts of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a Barry Lopez piece about road kill, and an E. O. Wilson article about ants—then write a longer one ourselves, based on our journal entries. Writing and nature go hand-in-hand.

A wonderful resource for thinking about literature and environmental issues is a two-issue project of *Oregon English Journal* in 2008. (Full disclosure: I'm on the volunteer editorial board of this magazine published by my state's English teachers' group.) These issues—"Ecological Literacy: Tending the Untended Garden, Volumes I and II"—have dozens of ideas and resources for teachers interested in bringing an environmental perspective into their English classrooms. Included are articles by college professors about environmental literature classes, about using nature observations to lead to research papers, and about the attitude toward the environment expressed in Native American folklore. You can also find articles by high school teachers who share classroom-tested ideas for reading and writing nature poetry, for blending literature and field experience, for teaching geography through literature, and for setting up environmental service-learning projects, community gardens, and science fairs. Both these issues of *Oregon English Journal* are available from the National Council of Teachers of English online store.

Questions ecocritics might raise about a literary work include: What is the attitude toward nature expressed by this work? Is it romanticized, respectful, fearful, rapacious? Does the work treat nature as something humans must coexist with or as something

humans must battle and master? Are humans considered part of the natural setting or separated from it? How is landscape treated? What are the underlying ecological values of the work? What attitudes and behaviors might they engender toward the earth?

Following are some works that raise ecological questions and issues:

### Novels

- Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*
- Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*
- Jim Lynch, *The Highest Tide*
- Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

### Nonfiction Works

- Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*, *The Sense of Wonder*, *Silent Spring*
- Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*
- Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*
- Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*
- Kim R. Stafford, *Having Everything Right: Essays of Place*
- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

### Poems

- W. H. Auden, "Their Lonely Betters"
- Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things," "The Want of Peace"
- Ellen Bass, "After Winter Rains"
- Joseph Bruchac, "First Deer"
- William Cullen Bryant, "The Gladness of Nature"
- Emily Dickinson, "Of Nature I Shall Have Enough"
- H. D., "Late Spring"
- Donald Hall, "Ox Cart Man" (the longer version in the children's book)
- D. H. Lawrence, "I Am Part of the Sun"
- Christopher Merrill, "Concert"
- Amy Lowell, "Song"
- Mary Oliver, "Messenger," "The Summer Day"
- Paulann Petersen, "One Work of this Earth," "To the River Living a Few Streets Away," "Basin"
- Edgar Allan Poe, "To the Lake"
- Edna St. Vincent Millay, "The Leaf and the Tree"
- Adrienne Rich, "Storm Warnings"
- Christina Rossetti, "A Green Cornfield"
- Charles Simic, "Poem," "Stone," "Thrush"
- Gary Snyder, "Ripples on the Surface"

- William Stafford, “What the River Says,” “Why I Am Happy”
- Anne Stevenson, “The Fish Are All Sick”
- Arthur Sze, “The Shape of Leaves”
- David Wagoner, “Lost”
- Miles Garrett Watson, “Sermon of an Elder Catfish”
- Walt Whitman, “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”
- Richard Wilbur, “Boy at the Window”
- William Wordsworth, “The Daffodils”

In sum, ecocriticism looks at the ways literature interacts with the environment. The goal is that our natural environment last as long and vigorously as, say, Shakespeare’s plays.

\* \* \* \* \*

These are just some of the more prominent forms of political criticism, literary approaches that seek in their own ways (whether we agree with them or not) to interpret, analyze, and evaluate works of literature based on the way they help improve society and better the human condition.

# A Collection of Quotes About Political or Advocacy Criticism

## Pro

*It may come from my political feelings, but I think art, literature, fiction, poetry, whatever it is, makes justice in the world. That's why it almost always has to be on the side of the underdog.*

—Grace Paley

*I've always thought . . . that it was one of the responsibilities of playwrights to show people how they are and what their time is like in the hope that perhaps they'll change it.*

—Edward Albee

*Sometimes it's the artist's duty to tell the truth and raise hell too.*

—John Frohnmayer

*What is poetry which does not save/Nations or people?*

—Czesław Miłosz

*I don't want people after having watched my plays leaving the theater thinking about the theater; I want them thinking about the world.*

—Bertolt Brecht

*A literature born in the process of crisis and change, and deeply immersed in the risks and events of its time, can indeed help to create the symbols of a new reality, and perhaps—if talent and courage are not lacking—throw light on the signs along the road. To claim that literature on its own is going to change reality would be an act of madness or arrogance. It seems to me no less foolish to deny that it can aid in making this change.*

—Eduardo Galeano

*A writer cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it.*

—Albert Camus

*Artists should not distance themselves from their times. They should leap into the fray and see what good they can accomplish there . . . an artist's integrity stands to be strengthened, not compromised, by reckoning with the social reality.*

—Herbert Muschamp

*If you call yourself a poet, don't just sit there. Poetry is not a sedentary occupation, not a "take your seat" practice. Stand up and let them have it.*

—Lawrence Ferlinghetti

*The proletarian writer is a writer with a purpose; he thinks no more of "art for art's sake" than a man on a sinking ship thinks of painting a beautiful picture in the cabin.*

—Upton Sinclair

*Good art is political, whether it means to be so or not, insofar as it provides a chance to understand points of view alien to our own. Its nature is the opposite of spiritual meanness, bigotry, and warfare.*

—Barbara Kingsolver

*Art is not a mirror to reflect reality but a hammer with which to shape it.*

—Bertolt Brecht

*What is it that frightens us about a "novel of causes," and conversely, does fiction have to exist in some suspended, apolitical landscape in order to be literary? Can't it be politically and temporally specific and still be in good literary taste? We are leery of literature that smacks of the polemic, instructional, or prescriptive, and I guess rightly so—it's a drag to be lectured—but what does that imply about our attitudes toward intellectual inquiry? While I enjoy reading kitchen-table novels in which characters are distilled to their emotional essence and their lives stripped of politics and commerce, it is simply not reflective of my experience. I see our lives as being part of an enormous web of interconnected spheres, where the workings of the larger social, political, and corporate machinery impact something as private and intimate as the descent of an egg through a woman's fallopian tube. This is the resonance I want to conjure in my books.*

—Ruth Ozeki

*Great art questions orthodoxies.*

—Eaven Boland

*I want my poems—I want all of my work—to engage, and to empower people to speak, to strengthen themselves into who they most want and need to be and then to act, to do what needs being done . . . June Jordan once said something which is just wonderful. I'm paraphrasing her—that her function as a poet was to make revolution irresistible . . . that is the function of us all, as creative artists, to make the truth, as we see it irresistible. That's what I want to do with all of my writing.*

—Audre Lord

## Con

*Politics in a literary work is like a gunshot in the middle of a concert, something vulgar and, however, something that is impossible to ignore.*

—Stendahl

*. . . fiction is in most ways hostile to ideology.*

—Joan Didion

*No poem or play or song can fully right a wrong . . .*

—Seamus Heaney

*Literature is engaged in a set of ideas fundamental to the human experience that transcend time; otherwise, it is irrelevant. Thus [political] methods of criticism such as historicism and Marxism, methods that focus on what brings about literature and not what sustains it, are not valid methods.*

—Student Jeremy Rozansky

*The mind that can follow a “mission” is not an artistic one.*

—Willa Cather

*The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.*

—James Baldwin

*Politics is the great generalizer and literature the great particularizer, and not only are they in an inverse relationship to each other—they are in an antagonistic relationship. To politics, literature is decadent, soft, irrelevant, boring, wrongheaded, dull, something that makes no sense and that really oughtn't to be. Why? Because the particularizing impulse is literature. How can you be an artist and renounce the nuance? But how can you be a politician and allow the nuance? As an artist the nuance is your task. Your task is not to simplify. Even should you choose to write in the simplest way, à la Hemingway, the task remains to impart the nuance, to elucidate the complication, to imply the contradiction. Not to erase the contradiction, not to deny the contradiction, but to see where, within the contradiction, lies the tormented human being. To allow for the chaos, to let it in. You must let it in. Otherwise you produce propaganda.*

—Philip Roth



# Formalist Criticism for Students: Analyzing Writing Craft

By Tim Gillespie

*[Of] the questions which interest me most when reading a poem . . . the first is technical:  
“Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?”*

—W. H. Auden

## An Overview and Benefits

Formalism, sometimes called New Criticism (even though it has been around a long time), involves the careful analysis of a literary text’s craft. Ignoring any historical context, any biographical information about an author, any philosophical or psychological issues, or even any of a text’s political or moral messages, the formalist is simply interested in taking the text apart to see how it works as a piece of art—as an electronics wonk might take a radio apart to see how the radio’s components work together without paying attention to the music or news broadcast. In literature, the focus of this detailed examination is to consider the way the components of language—a text’s *formal elements*—give form and meaning to the completed literary text.

The formalist strategy for answering that question is a careful scanning of the text, a detailed analysis often called *close reading*. In close reading, one examines a piece of literature closely, seeking to understand its structure, looking for patterns that shape the work and connect its parts to the whole, and searching for uses of language that contribute to the effect.

Formalists, or New Critics, are particularly keen on isolating parts of a text for an intensive look—under the assumption that any small passage can be a microcosm that contains or signals the meaning of the whole, as a single strand of DNA can reveal the genetic code of a whole organism. They tend to pick a few sections of a poem or story, assess the writer’s moves, and then try to relate those sections to other sections and to the whole work to determine what principle or theme tied them together. They look at individual words, puzzling out meanings and word histories, considering allusions to other literature, and trying to discern patterns and relationships. They consider the text’s form, whether it’s a tightly structured rhyming sonnet or an unstructured work of free verse, a chronological realistic novel or a complex modernist fiction that jumps around in time. They look at specific literary devices—paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension. They look at figurative language—images, symbols, metaphors—and language

structures—syntax, diction, rhyme, and rhythm. The way all these formal elements work together are considered to constitute a text’s meaning.

New Critics tend to believe that a *best interpretation* of each text can be discovered. In other words, there is generally a single “right” way to interpret each text. But this reading must reflect the text and be supported with evidence from the text and only the text—nothing *off the page*.

These formalist moves have many benefits for young readers. Most important, formalism encourages close, attentive reading. This kind of rigorous analysis can sharpen readers’ critical reading and thinking skills.

In addition, the formalist insistence on textual support is helpful reinforcement for good writing habits. Formalism requires that interpretations be validated with specific examples from the text. This is good practice for any argument, whether on an English class paper, a history paper, a letter to an editor, a business proposal, or a political discussion. Formalism demands *textual evidence* to back up assertions, which reinforces a central characteristic of all effective persuasion.

Furthermore, in its analysis of how literature works and how authors create their effects, formalism offers insights to writers. As we assess the moves of professional writers, we are learning moves we can use in our own writing. A formalist focus on the writing craft is as helpful to writers as it is to readers.

Because of its insistence on dealing with the text without any references off the page, formalism requires no research from readers. We don’t need to consult other experts or check out the historical or biographical context to interpret, analyze, or evaluate a text. We can simply dig deeply into it.

## Limitations and Critiques of Formalist Criticism

Many complaints have been raised about different aspects of formalism.

The New Critics said a text is a crafted object waiting for us to find its single, stable “best meaning.” Doesn’t that insistence on an ultimate “correct” reading deny the lovely complexity of much great literature? Can the meaning of a text ever be firmly settled once and for all? Won’t it be different for different readers at different times and in different places?

The New Critics asserted that everything off the page is irrelevant, dismissing psychology, philosophy, history, biography, and many other avenues of possible literary discussion inquiry. Does reading really have to be this reductive? Why narrow the joys of literature? Why ignore all these rich aspects of the reading experience? Why ignore the moral and political implications of literature? Why look at artistic craftsmanship only, without considering a text’s commentary on the human condition?

Another complaint is that formalist criticism works best with only certain kinds of writing, such as carefully designed texts by writers who love complex formal

structures and devices. This leaves a lot of literature outside the door. What about more spontaneously and loosely crafted texts? What about free-verse poets who rebel against the old traditions of rhyme, meter, and structure, asserting that “form is dead”? What about writers who just aren’t deliberate about their choices?

One final complaint is that the formalist approach can devolve into a hunt for what some readers feel are obscure literary devices (*synecdoche*, *metonymy*, *enjambment!*). This can seem nitpicky and trivial. Or, as a student said after taking the formalist-focused AP English Literature exam, “Why didn’t they ask us something *important?*”

## To Sum Up

Formalists love to analyze all the rich devices that writers employ. They remind us not to get distracted from the text by other matters. They encourage us to consider how an understanding of the form and technical artistry of a text is essential to an understanding of its ultimate meaning. Craft and content are not easily separable, they assert. These critics have encouraged us to be more thoughtful, careful readers.

# Formalist Criticism for Students: Analyzing Writing Craft

By Tim Gillespie

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—W. H. Auden

## An Overview

Formalism is sometimes called New Criticism (or Practical Criticism, Close Reading, or Text Explication). Regardless of the name, all these approaches involve the careful analysis of a literary text's craft. Ignoring any cultural or historical context, any biographical background on an author, any political or philosophical implications, and any moral or psychological dynamics, the formalist is more interested in simply taking a text apart to see how it works—as an electronics wonk might take a radio apart to see how the radio's components operate together without any particular interest in the music or news broadcast. In literature, the focus of this detailed examination, or *close reading*, is the way the components of language—diction, syntax, rhyme and meter, symbols, metaphors, allusions, uses of point of view, and so forth—form the completed literary text, which is why we call them *formal elements*. The question for the formalist is simply, How does this text achieve its effects? All the answers to that question can be found by a careful scanning of the text, and from a formalist perspective, we simply confuse the issue if we bring in any other literary lenses or off-the-page factors or frames.

A concentration on the form, style, and technique of works of literature—in other words, matters of writing craft—has characterized literary criticism from its ancient beginnings to today. In ancient Greece, for example, Aristotle discussed in his *Poetics* the orderly arrangement of elements essential to make a dramatic work come alive. Centuries later, the British Romantic poets of the early 1800s, enthralled with nature, latched onto the notion of the poem as a living organism, whose parts, like the parts of a physical body, are crucial to the harmonious functioning of the whole.

The thinking of a number of twentieth-century scholars switched this critical approach into overdrive.

As a young teacher at Cambridge University in the 1920s, I. A. Richards (1893–1979) embarked on a series of experiments with his students, handing out a dozen or so poems—some from highly praised writers, some from derided writers, some from obscure

writers—without any information on who wrote them or when, where, or under what circumstances. His aim was to get his college students to concentrate on the words on the page without the distraction of any preconceived ideas regarding the author or historical context, any received beliefs about texts, or even any influence from him, their professor.

In his famous 1929 book about the experiments, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*, Richards detailed the many problems his bright students had with interpretation when all the props they were accustomed to were removed. Richards concluded that his students didn't have tools to think about poems on their own but had grown dependent on the prior judgments of others rather than on their own critical judgments. Thus, he proposed in this book and others a set of exacting standards for analyzing literary texts as structures built on language choices, disregarding any surrounding information about author or context that might influence a pure reading.

About the same time, the American-turned-British poet T. S. Eliot wrote an influential essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which he took great pains to separate poets and their poems, noting that we shouldn't confuse the writer's life story or psychology with the poem he or she crafts. "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry," said Eliot (1974, 31).

In the same era, two Yale University scholars, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, came up with a couple of no-no's of criticism that also had an influence on formalist thinking. These two Yale University buddies coined the concepts of "the intentional fallacy" (that is, worrying about an author's intentions in writing a text) and "the affective fallacy" (that is, trying to theorize about a poem's effects on a reader's *affect* or emotions). As is obvious from the smackdown term "fallacy," Wimsatt and Beardsley thought it an error to consider either of these factors when reading—a confusion between the text and its origins on the one hand or its results on the other. Leave the writer's intentions to biographers and leave the reader's response to psychologists, they said; critics should just be looking at the text itself. How can one define artistic standards based on anything other than the artwork?

All this intellectual spadework influenced a hotshot group of young scholars who converged after World War I at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Professor John Crowe Ransom and his students Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks, influenced by these intellectual forefathers, developed first a discussion group, then a literary magazine, and ultimately, a philosophy of analysis that became known as the *New Criticism*.

During the decades of the 1930s and 1940s, these *New Critics* grew greatly in influence, spurred by books detailing their critical philosophy and methodologies. By the 1950s, New Criticism had become the dominant school of thought in university English departments and influential literary journals.

Even today, some of the most prominent literary criticism comes from scholars shaped by the New Critics' formalism. The contemporary Harvard professor and frequent poetry reviewer Helen Vendler, for example, has continued to blast those who evaluate

poetry on what she disdains as political ideology, psychology, autobiography, morality, or anything other than the ways words are put together. In her 1997 book *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Vendler (who has reportedly memorized and can recite all 154 of the Bard of Avon's sonnets) counsels readers to ignore anything that takes attention away from Shakespeare's brilliant grammar, syntax, and word choice.

Perhaps most telling, a formalist analysis of texts is the major focus of the Advanced Placement English Literature exam taken by hundreds of thousands of American high school students each year. Because of this factor alone, formalism, for better or worse, is still probably the dominant and privileged mode of literary approach in many high school English classrooms, sometimes even referred to as "the AP style of analysis."

Thus, though the New Critics are kind of old critics now, there's no denying the effect their formalist methodology has had, and continues to have, on literary criticism and on students in classrooms.

## Benefits of Formalist Criticism

To assess the benefits of formalism, we should reiterate how it works.

As the name suggests, formalist criticism has for its main object the relation of form and meaning—that is, how a work of literature expresses its meaning through its structure, shape, and technique. Formalists insist that what a text says and how it says it are inextricable issues. The belief that a reader's experience is primarily a function of a text's craft has significant implications.

First, as has been noted, formalism draws our attention squarely to the work of art perched on the page—nothing else but that carefully fabricated text and how it works. What really makes any literary text successful or not is its craft; all other concerns are just distractions and detours.

In other words, John Milton's theology is not why we read *Paradise Lost*. The dated political intrigues in *Hamlet* do not interest most readers today. The Brontë sisters' struggles as female writers in a sexist age are not what draw us to *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*. Kurt Vonnegut's antiwar stance during the Vietnam War era is not why his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* is so compelling. Tillie Olsen's poverty, Edgar Allan Poe's madness, Walt Whitman's sexual orientation, or Samuel Taylor Coleridge's addiction to drugs are not what is most important about these authors; rather, what is most important is their work, the fruits of their creative labors, rather than the facts of their everyday lives. A reader who applies Freudian psychological insights to a main character is dealing with psychology, not with art. A reader who seeks philosophical insight from a novel or play is dealing with philosophy, not art. A reader wondering how the life of a poet is reflected in her poems is dealing with biography, not art. These aspects of a work of art may all be interesting, but they are peripheral and transitory issues. Readers and reading fads change, but a text does not. It is only a text's formal accomplishments that will ultimately

last, say the New Critics, only its formal artistry that may allow a text to become a timeless classic. Thus, the formalist mantra is, “Pay attention only to *the text itself*.”

Furthermore, formalist critics are not interested in what Cleanth Brooks called “the heresy of paraphrase.” A summary or paraphrase of a poem’s meaning or content misses the point. Constructed of words in a specific, unique relationship to one another, a poem’s effect cannot be captured by restating it in other words. Translating what we see as a poem’s meaning into everyday language diminishes its power, substituting the mundane for the one-of-a-kind constructions of the poem. The meaning is inseparable from the original form. Or, as the poet X. J. Kennedy put it, “To hell with poetry that has no more interest than the mere miserable prose meaning of it.”

So, avoiding anything outside the text and pooh-poohing paraphrase, what do formalist critics do? They analyze and evaluate texts based on their artistry, asking, How is the effect of this literary text achieved by its craft?

The main formalist strategy is a close, careful analysis—often called *close reading* or, in its French version, *explication de texte* (text explication). To be a New Critic, one must examine a piece of literature carefully, looking to unlock its structure, looking for unifying patterns that shape the text and give its parts relevance to the whole, and searching for uses of language and ambiguities, ironies, and tensions that contribute to the whole effect.

The New Critics were particularly keen on isolating parts of a text for an intensive look—under the assumption that any small passage can be a microcosm that contains or signals the meaning of the whole, as a single strand of DNA can reveal the genetic code of a whole organism. They would pick a few sections of a poem or story, assess the writer’s moves, then try to relate those sections to other sections and to the whole text to determine what principle or theme tied them together. They would look at individual words, puzzling out meanings from etymologies and ambiguities, and then consider allusions to other literature and myths and the patterns and interrelationships. They’d consider the meanings that inhere in form, from the highly structured rhythms of a sonnet to the unstructured dissonances of free verse, from the predictable parts of a Greek play to the dreamscapes of absurdist drama, from the linearity of the realistic novel to the complex stream of consciousness of modernist masterworks. They’d look at specific literary devices—paradox, irony, ambiguity, tension. They’d look at figurative language—images, symbols, metaphors. They’d look at language structures—syntax, diction, rhyme, and rhythm. All these formal elements would be considered as constituting a text’s meaning.

After this analysis, the New Critics would then evaluate the quality of the work based on its organic unity, the working together of all the parts to make a poem or story that simultaneously expresses the complexity of the human condition and the orderliness of nature.

And, importantly, the New Critics believed that given the objective nature of the one-of-a-kind artifact of words sitting on the page, a single best or most accurate interpretation of each text could be discovered. That best reading would be the one that

best represented the text itself. In other words, there is generally a single “right” way to interpret each piece of literature.

These formalist moves have many benefits for young readers. Most important, formalism encourages close, attentive reading. The kind of rigorous analysis promoted by the New Critics has the promise of sharpening students’ reading and critical thinking skills.

In addition, the formalist insistence on textual support is helpful reinforcement for good writing habits. Most notably, formalism requires that interpretations be validated with specific examples from the text. This is good practice for any argument, whether on an English class paper, a history paper, a letter to an editor, a business proposal, or a political discussion. Formalism demands *textual evidence* to back up every assertion, which reinforces a central characteristic of all effective persuasion.

Furthermore, in its analysis of how literature works and how authors create their effects, formalism offers insights to young writers. As they assess the moves of professional writers, they are learning moves they can use in their own writing. A focus on the writing craft is as helpful to writers as it is to readers.

Because of its insistence on dealing with the text without any references off the page, formalism requires no research from readers. We don’t need to consult other experts or check out the historical or biographical context to interpret, analyze, or evaluate a text. We can simply dig deeply into it.

For all these reasons, and perhaps because of the formalist focus of the AP English Literature exam, formalism has taken a front seat in American high school English classrooms—and refuses to budge from it.

## Limitations and Critiques of Formalist Criticism

Many readers have been left scratching their heads in bewilderment at some of the truisms of the New Critics and other formalists.

The New Critics asserted that the text is a crafted object waiting for us to find its single, stable “best meaning.” Doesn’t that insistence on an ultimate “correct” reading deny the lovely complexity of much great literature? Can the meaning of a text ever be firmly settled once and for all? Why should we even attempt to limit the interpretive possibilities of great works of art? Isn’t the glory of lasting texts the way their meanings multiply over time? And doesn’t this idea that there’s a single interpretation deny the idea that any piece of writing is a collaboration between a writer and a reader? Isn’t meaning endlessly negotiated between readers and texts?

The New Critics asserted that everything off the page is irrelevant, dismissing psychology, morality, philosophy, history, biography, and many other avenues of possible literary inquiry. Does reading really have to be this reductive? Why narrow the joys of literature? Aren’t there riches to be mined in *all* the different veins of human activity that literature claims for its material?



Another recurring complaint is that formalist criticism works best with only certain kinds of literature. Because it examines the overall effect created by multiple literary devices, formalism is most attracted to carefully designed, densely textured works by writers who love structure and complexity, writers—and most particularly poets—with strong formal interests. This leaves a lot of literature outside the door.

Does formalism devalue literary texts that are simple and straightforward, or those that are raw, spontaneous, and loosely crafted? Does formalism devalue genres—stage plays, orations, slam poetry—crafted more for a listening audience than a reader sitting in a chair who has the time to puzzle out subtle complexities through extensive rereading? Does formalism devalue nonfiction in its favoring of poetry? Does it devalue novels, which often display resistance to form, as novelists attempt to convey the formless, fluid nature of life? And are all writers really that deliberate about their choices and the tools they use? Aren't many writers raw, intuitive, and spontaneous, or even simply unaware of how formal elements work? Doesn't a lot of formalist analysis give writers more credit than they deserve?

And what about the twentieth-century strain of poets who purposely rebelled against the old formal traditions of meter, rhyme, structure, and shapeliness, those free verse proponents who asserted that “form is dead”? Though a luminary such as Robert Frost could say “writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down,” many poets of subsequent generations wanted to escape the tennis court entirely. Many modern poets dismiss careful design for other considerations: emotional power, performance punchiness, and spontaneity. A formalist approach doesn't work so well with many contemporary poems of the type many of our students enjoy and write; it's tricky to analyze the form and shape of poems that consciously don't have any.

Perhaps the main gripe has been that in its absorption with form, New Criticism tends to overlook content, particularly important moral and philosophical ideas, historical insights, and political implications—in other words, the human feelings and issues that impel many writers to write. Many authors object to having their plays, poems, or stories analyzed only for formal artistic merit and craftsmanship without considering the works' commentaries on the human condition. You can't separate a poem from its world as the formalists seek to do, according to this complaint.

Political critics in particular have been vociferous in claiming that formalism is just a kind of airy literary branch that doesn't care to descend into the tricky terrain of life's ideological struggles. Terry Eagleton has said that the New Critic devotion to close reading and to dismissing anything off the page has turned the poem into a fetish—a little sacred object set on a pedestal, isolated from the rest of the world, to which we are to devote our obsessive reverence. This attempt takes the literary text completely out of its historic context and ignores entirely what it has to say about the current human condition. That's why, Eagleton claims, New Critics had such a bias for poetry and a lack of interest in the novel, a genre that by nature has broader historical scope and social concerns. The formalist worship of the autonomous poem, avoidance of political context, and focus on art for its

own sake is ultimately elitist, Eagleton and others asserted. The absolutist pronouncements of the New Critics have left behind the many readers who want to relate literature to life and ideas. Stripping art of any political or social context or force is stripping it of much of its power. Art for art's sake is an indulgence in a suffering world.

One more complaint is that the formalist approach can devolve into a hunt for obscure literary devices (*synecdoche, metonymy, enjambment!*). For some, this seems nitpicky and trivial. Or, as a student said after taking the AP English Literature exam, “Why didn't they ask us something *important!*”

These criticisms of formalism have helped lead to the decline of its influence in recent years, though there are still plenty of formalist thinkers around.

## To Sum Up

Formalists love to analyze all the rich devices writers employ in their texts. They remind us not to get distracted from the text in front of our eyes. They encourage us to consider how an understanding of the form and technical artistry of a text is essential to understanding its ultimate meaning. Craft and content are not easily separable, they assert. These influential critics have encouraged us to be more thoughtful, careful readers.

# The Methodology of Close Reading: A Brief Overview for Students

The formalist idea of *close reading* has spread widely, and you're liable to encounter it in college. Sometimes called *text explication* (from the Latin *explicare*: *to unfold or clarify the meaning*), close reading is simply a process of careful, disciplined reading.

The goal of close reading is to engage in a detailed examination of a poem or a short passage from a prose work to find a focus, a design, or an idea that might help explain the whole work. The method is to pay close attention to all the patterns, correspondences and tensions in the diction, syntax, imagery, symbolism, tone, and literary devices the author has chosen to use. The premise is that the text will be more fully understood and appreciated to the extent that the interrelations of its crafted parts are perceived.

A close reading strategy can also be used to help you land on an idea or thesis to pursue in writing about a text. Here's a typical close reading procedure:

1. Read the text once to get an overall impression, keeping in mind any questions the reading activates in your mind. Try to formulate an initial literal sense of the situation, meaning, point, or function of the passage as a whole (if it's a complete text) or within the larger whole (if it's only one small part of a longer work). What's the big idea? What's the author mostly talking about? Could you express or paraphrase it in a sentence? Why do you think the author wrote this? Pay attention for key passages that might convey particularly important messages.
2. Read the text again, more carefully this time, and *annotate* the text. Annotating is the fancy term for underlining, highlighting, or taking notes in the margins (if the book belongs to you) or taking notes in a notebook and keeping thoughts on sticky slips (if the book doesn't belong to you)—in other words, noting in some way key words, phrases, or passages you locate that seem important, surprising, bewildering, compelling, significant, or question raising. What grabs you? Provokes thought? Confuses? This is reading with your pen, and it will help your understanding and recall of the text. (If you have the time and energy, consider coming back the next day and reading and annotating the text carefully yet another time. Further readings often unearth further nuggets of insight.)
3. Now examine the key passages, words, or phrases you have annotated. What do you notice? What patterns emerge? What ideas, words, or moves recur? Do you find significant connections, repetitions, contradictions, multiple meanings, designs, motifs, or consistent uses or rhythm of language?

Based on the literary moves we've been studying (see "A List of Literary Terms"), how does the author use these devices of the writer's craft? Why has the author made these choices?

4. Formulate a statement that attempts to answer a couple of your questions about what you've noticed. The statement should reflect your speculations about the meaning of the text.
5. Now you're ready to write an essay with this statement as a focus. Remember to keep all your conclusions firmly grounded in the text of the work, supporting all assertions with evidence from the passage.

As Patricia Kain at the Harvard University Writing Center says, "As we proceed in this way, paying close attention to the evidence, asking questions and formulating interpretations, we engage in a process that is central to essay writing and to the whole academic enterprise: in other words, we reason toward our own ideas" (1998).

# A List of Literary Terms

The following is a lengthy list of literary terms that I put together for my students, always presented and studied with the reminder that we never want to substitute terminology for thinking.

Because the list is a large chunk of text to chew on, I've tried different ways over the years to help students digest it successfully. One recent strategy has been to deal out different terms to small groups of two or three students—the first group taking *diction*, for example, the second group *syntax*, and so on. Students are given a class period to read the description, discuss it, and then put together a short presentation on that term for their classmates. In the presentation, they must define and explain the assigned term, give at least three specific examples of its use from any of the texts we've read for class that year, and then make some conclusions about how those specific examples contribute to the meaning of the text as a whole. That last part of the assignment is its most challenging aspect, but overall, this has proved to be effective for working through this exhaustive list of literary terms in three or four class periods.

## A Partial List of Literary Terms

### 1. Diction

*Diction* refers to an author's choice of words to impart a particular effect on the reader. Diction will be driven by the writer's purpose—whether to explain, amuse, inflame, persuade, impress, or whatever—as well as the writer's audience—whether best friend, professor, newspaper reader, scholarship committee, boss, or whomever.

Most users of language easily *switch register*, as the linguists call it, in different social situations; that is, we can all speak in a range of language variants, depending on the social context. With our friends, for example, we may be informal and slangy, and we may use in-group words known only by members of our particular posse. At our job, we use workplace jargon with our coworkers and polite, agreeable, neutral speech with customers. At a funeral, we hear a hushed, respectful level of diction, while at a doctor's appointment, we hear a straightforward, technical, clinical level of diction. The words we choose are often calibrated to a specific audience for a specific purpose.

The same is true in writing. A formal academic paper will require one level of diction, a letter to the editor another, and an e-mail to friends an entirely different level.

So when you as a reader decide to consider the diction of a work of literature, start looking at these word choice polarities: formal/informal, poetic/prosaic, simple/complex, abstract/concrete, plain/ornate, monosyllabic/polysyllabic,

precise/rambling, everyday or colloquial/technical or specialized. Diction can signal social class or status, education, region, or ethnicity. Or watch to see whether the level of diction changes in the course of the work, which may signal something the author wants us to notice.

A consideration of a work's level of diction also includes an examination of *semantics*, which is a consideration of the range of meanings that cluster around individual words. Words have both *denotations* and *connotations*. Denotations are the literal dictionary meanings of words. Connotations are what lies beneath the dictionary definitions, the deeper meanings suggested by the histories of words or the associations and emotional responses they may elicit. Formalist critics remind us to maintain an awareness of the multiple meanings of words, their potential shiftiness, even their *etymologies* or histories (as revealed in dictionaries), all of which can offer significant guideposts to what the work says. Ask yourself: Do the words in this work have significant connotations adding depth and resonance to their denotations?

The bottom-line questions about diction are these: Why does the author make these particular choices about words? How does the author's level of diction influence the meaning in the work of literature?

## 2. Syntax

*Syntax* refers to the way words are arranged within sentences. Syntax encompasses word order, the structure of phrases and clauses, sentence length and variety, sentence emphasis, and punctuation. Some people confuse diction with syntax; just remember that diction refers to the *selection* of words, while syntax refers to the *arrangement* of words.

Formalist critics assume that authors make intentional decisions to structure their sentences for effect. Writers can make many choices about syntax. Though the basic structure of the English sentence is prescribed in many ways (there generally must be a subject and verb, for example, and word order cannot be random), there is still great latitude for the writer. Here are some syntactic decisions to watch for:

Does the author use sentences that are simple or sentences that are compound, complex, and convoluted? Some writers like more terse, direct prose (Ernest Hemingway comes to mind), while others prefer more dense, clause-packed, complicated sentences (Toni Morrison, for example). What are the effects of sentence fragments? Run-ons? How do these different syntactic structures change things for the reader?

Does the author use patterns of repetition or parallel structure for emphasis? Authors can parallel words and phrases to balance ideas or for antithesis or other effects, as Charles Dickens did in his famous opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Repetition adds emphasis, as in Dr. Martin Luther King's powerful "I Have a Dream" speech with its refrain.

Does the author invert any traditional syntactic structures? For example, most sentences and clauses in modern English follow the word order *subject-verb-object*: “The girl (*subject*) walloped (*verb*) the baseball (*object*).” Writers can turn this around, as in the case of changing from active voice (where the noun performs the action of the verb, as in the previous example) to passive (where the action of the verb is performed on the noun, as in “The baseball was walloped by the girl”). We can see how the passive would be useful in some circumstances (such as replacing “He told a lie” with “A lie was told”), as the passive tends to weaken our sense of the principal noun’s agency as prime actor of the sentence. Other traditions include the fact that adjectives tend to come before nouns (e.g., the *well-worn* baseball); changing this (e.g., “The girl walloped the baseball, well worn and unraveling”) might draw more attention to the object of the sentence than the subject. Sophisticated writers often gain effects by departing from our syntactic traditions.

Does the author use any *periodic sentences*? (Periodic sentences maintain tension and interest by withholding completion of some grammatical structures until the end of a sentence, e.g., “As long as we ignore our children and refuse to dedicate the necessary time and money to their care, we will fail to solve the problem of school violence.” Note the main idea is held to the end of the sentence here.) A more conventional sentence would turn that example around. So what’s the effect?

Does the author use punctuation for a particular effect? The poet e. e. cummings purposely subverted traditional punctuation, capitalization, and typography in his poems. How did this support his meaning? And what’s with those dashes in Emily Dickinson’s poems? What about those page-long sentences by William Faulkner or James Joyce? What do these unique punctuation designs bring to each writer’s work? Can you find any interesting uses of commas, semicolons, colons, or other punctuation marks?

In many ways, writers can employ syntactic elements to support their goals. The bottom-line questions about syntax are these: Why does the author make these particular choices about the arrangement of sentences? How does the author’s syntax affect and influence the meaning of the work of literature?

### 3. Imagery

*Imagery* refers to the verbal representation of sensory experience. Imagery is how the writer uses language to explore all five senses, explaining how something looks (visual imagery), sounds (auditory imagery), feels to the sense of touch (tactile imagery) or motion (kinetic or kinesthetic imagery), smells (olfactory imagery), or tastes (gustatory imagery). Skillful writers mix up their sensory images, not overrelying on sight. Detailed imagery can evoke vivid experience. The bottom-line question about imagery is this: How does the author involve us in the story through the activation of the senses?

## 4. Symbolism

*Symbolism* refers to anything that means more than what it is in literature; or, in other words, a symbol is something that is itself and yet represents something else. An image or object can be used to suggest complex or multiple meanings. For example, the sled in the great film “Citizen Kane” can be seen to symbolize youth and innocence; the conch shell in *Lord of the Flies* seems to symbolize order and authority; the billboard of eyeglasses in the ashyard in *Great Gatsby* perhaps symbolizes the diminishment of a public conscience. Or a character, action, or setting might symbolize a larger meaning. For example, Siddhartha’s specific life voyage may symbolize the universal human journey through life, or the river where he becomes a ferryman may symbolize the ever-present chance of spiritual rebirth and cleansing in the cycle of life. The bottom-line question about symbolism is this: What elements in this work seem to function as symbols, and what might they represent?

## 5. Motif

*Motifs* are dominant recurring themes or patterns of imagery, symbolism, or ideas. In painting, weaving, or pottery, a motif is a repeated design, color, or pattern. In music, a *leitmotif* is a melodic phrase associated with and repeatedly accompanying a character, idea, or situation, as in Sergei Prokofiev’s delightful “Peter and the Wolf,” in which characters have their own personal musical signatures to accompany every appearance. In literature, a motif may be any continually recurring thematic element, such as the theme of death in *Hamlet*, the image of flying in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, or the contrasts of black and white in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

The bottom-line question about motif is this: What motifs seem to be popping up in this work, and what might they signify?

## 6. Tone

*Tone* refers to the expression of the writer’s attitude (or at least what we infer is the attitude) toward his or her subject. In oral communication, most of us can figure out pretty quickly from a speaker’s *tone of voice* what his or her attitude toward the subject is: passionate, concerned, amused, angry, delighted, neutral, detached, critical, serious, sentimental. The speaker’s tone of voice conveys emotion that expresses the intent of the speech and thus sets the relationship between the speaker and the listener; we know quickly if we’re going to be inspired, cajoled, amused, lectured, informed, or inflamed. The same works in writing between author and reader.

The bottom-line question about tone is this: What seems to be the speaker’s emotional attitude toward the subject in the passage?



## 7. Point of View

*Point of view* refers to the stance of the narrator or the narrative perspective. Fictional stories are mostly told in *first person* or *third person*. A first-person narrator is when the author has a character tell his or her own story using the “I” pronoun, without direct interpretation by the author. Or maybe that first-person narrator isn’t really the protagonist of the story but the chief observer. Readers then have to decide whether first-person narrators are *dependable* or *undependable*. Are those first-person narrators reliably believable or not? Are they fooling us? Are they fooling themselves? A third-person narrator usually strikes us as more trustworthy, but an author adopting a third-person narration still has to decide whether to adopt an *omniscient* stance (where the author has unlimited access to all characters, knows all, sees all, and tells all as he or she pleases) or whether to adopt a *limited* stance (where the author limits himself or herself to experiencing the story through only one character’s consciousness). Some writers talk about an *objective* stance, with the author entering no character’s consciousness but serving merely as a camera, recording action without comment or interpretation, leaving the reader a spectator. Occasionally, readers may encounter narratives told in the rare *second person* “you” voice and then have to assess how that offbeat perspective works.

In addition, stories can be told in *past tense* or *present tense*, or a mixture thereof, and each different chronological point of view conveys an entirely different sort of reality.

The bottom-line question about point of view is this: How does the author’s point of view support the meaning of the work of literature?

## 8. Theme

*Theme* refers to a work of literature’s main message, central insight, dominating thought, primary ethical lesson or philosophic issue, universal truth, or unifying concept with which an author seems most concerned—or which speaks most directly to a reader. The theme is the broadest or most persuasive concern of a work, which may be best expressed broadly in a few words or a phrase, such as illusion versus reality, the tyranny of fate, the vagaries of love, or the futility of revenge. (Some teachers demand that a theme be expressed as a complete sentence that doesn’t just phrase the topic but also what the author has to say about it. For example, “*Lord of the Flies* expresses the theme that without the governing boundaries of society, human behavior will devolve to savagery.”) The theme is usually an abstract idea that seems to us to summarize what we perceive as the author’s purpose or effect in writing. However, there may be as many themes attached to a text as there are readers of it, for ultimately the theme stems from the insights and emotions each of us experiences when encountering a text.

The bottom-line question about theme is this: In the broadest, most traditional sense, what seems to be the moral or chief insight of the story?

## 9. Literary Devices

*Literary devices* is a broad label for all the *figures of speech* and other mechanisms of language that enrich writing. Sometimes we call these devices *tropes*, from an ancient Greek word meaning “a turn or a change,” signaling the way these devices turn and stretch our everyday uses of language. Examples are plentiful:

Figurative language includes the use of *metaphor*, a comparison between things that are essentially unlike; metaphor implies that something *is* something else, as in the country song, “Love is a rose . . . sweet and thorny.” An explicit metaphor that uses the signaling words “like” or “as” in its comparison is a *simile*: “My love is like a old pair of socks, comfy and all stretched out.” *Analogies* are more extended comparisons of unlike things.

*Personification* is the attribution of personal or human qualities to objects or animals. In John Keats’s “To Autumn,” for example, autumn is personified as “sitting careless on a granary floor.”

Many literary devices have to do with sound, including *alliteration*, which is the repetition of initial consonant sounds in neighboring words (“the seething sea sings”); *assonance*, which is the repetition of vowel sounds but not consonant sounds (“fleet feet sweep by”); and *consonance*, which is the repetition of consonant sounds but not vowels (“the ambling lady loudly called”). *Onomatopoeia* (sometimes called “imitative harmony”) is a word that imitates the sound it represents: *splash, gush, kerplunk, buzz, crash, whirr, hiss, purr*.

Literary or dramatic *irony*, a contradiction between what is said and what is meant, what is done and what was intended, or what is expected and what actually occurs, is an essential tool in many writers’ kits. Ironic moves can include *paradox, oxymoron, hyperbole, and understatement*.

The bottom-line question about literary devices is this: What devices and figures of speech has the author used, and how have these devices supported the author’s intentions?

## 10. Allusion

*Allusion* is a cultural reference to other literature, previous history or historical characters or events or places, mythology, art, and so forth. Allusions may be drawn from history, geography, literature, religion, or folklore. Common sources of English literary allusions range from Greek mythology to the King James Bible to Shakespeare. The titles of John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, and Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, for example, are all allusions—to, respectively, a Robert Burns poem, a John Donne essay, a Shakespeare play, a book in the Bible, and a child’s nursery rhyme.

The bottom-line question about allusions is this: What is being referred to here, and why? What resonance does this echoing create?

## 11. Fictional Devices

*Plot* can be defined as the order of events in a story or the pattern that results. Most plots involve *conflict*, external or internal, or both, as characters participate in the series of actions. Plot devices include *foreshadowing*, *quick cuts*, *juxtaposition*, *flashback*, *flash-forward*, and so on. The ancient Greeks talked about reversal, recognition, and suffering as essential plot points in a tragedy. They criticized the artificiality of *deus ex machina* plot resolutions, and liked *unity of action* (a play occurring in the span of one day, focusing on one central issue that would be circled around for the whole play and considered repeatedly, deepening the meaning). Traditional plot maps chart a pattern of *exposition*, *rising action*, *crisis/climax*, *falling action/denouement*. Stories can be set in *past* or *present tense*, or can bounce between them.

*Setting* is the background against which a story takes place; it creates the story's context and atmosphere. Aspects include geographic location, landscape (which can itself serve almost as a character), time or period in which action occurs, and props and physical objects. Effectively conveying a time and place, a *milieu*, is a matter of richly detailing the setting.

*Characters* are the players in a narrative. Fictional characters are developed through description, actions, thoughts, and speeches, direct statement from the writer, and opinions voiced by other characters. Characters can be identified as *static*, meaning they undergo no changes in the story, or *dynamic*, meaning they undergo a permanent change, for better or worse, in personality, outlook, or some other aspect of character. Characters can be *flat* (one dimensional) or *round* (complex and multidimensional and changing), believable or fantastic, the *protagonist*, the *antagonist*, or a *foil*—a complementary character who puts a protagonist into sharper focus, such as Sherlock Holmes's Dr. Watson or Don Quixote's Sancho Panza—or a mere supporting cast member.

Bottom-line questions about all these fictional devices include: How do these moves affect the narrative? How do they convey or reflect the meaning?

## 12. Poetic Devices

Besides the general literary devices and figures of speech noted above (*metaphor*, *simile*, *personification*, *alliteration*, *assonance*, *consonance*, *onomatopoeia*), poets have many other tools of their historic trade that they can employ. Infinite variations in meter, rhyme, and structure are hanging on the wall, ready to be taken down and put on for a given poetic occasion.

*Meter*, the rhythm of a poem, is created by a combination of line length and syllable stress. Wordsmiths have identified common sound patterns in English, including the *iamb* (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, as in “da-DUM”), the *trochee* (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one, as in “DUM-da”), the *dactyl* (a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones, as in

DUM-da-da” or the word “tenderly”), and the *anapest* (two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one, as in “da-da-DUM” or the word “anapest”). These little syllable-units of rhythm, which in music would be called *measures* but which in literature we usually call *feet* (for no apparent reason other than that they walk us bouncily through a line), can then be joined in lines of varying lengths.

The most common historic meter in English poetry has been *iambic pentameter*. This is a line of five of those iambs, or five iambic feet, so it reads, “da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM.” Or, in the very first line of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, “In sooth I know not *why* I am so sad.”

W. H. Auden uses *trochaic tetrameter* (four trochees in each line) in his poem “Lay Your Sleeping Head”: “Lay your *sleeping head*, my love/Human on your *faithless arm*.” (Note how he cuts the final trochee in each of those two lines short by a syllable, a way to vary a pattern that is called *catalexis*.)

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow uses dactylic hexameter (six dactyls lined up in a row) in the long first line of his poem “Evangeline”: “*This* is the *forest primeval*. The *murmuring pines* and the *hemlocks*.” (Longfellow also cuts that last dactyl off one syllable short, another example of *catalexis*.)

The famous Christmas poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas” is written in *anapestic tetrameter* (four anapests per line): “’Twas the *night* before *Christmas* and *all* through the *house*.”

All these metrical possibilities give each metered poem its own beat.

Poets can also mess around with the way a poem flows. They can employ *end-stopping*, where each line has a logical pause at its end or constitutes a distinct linguistic unit, as Shakespeare crafted in much of his stunning Act V conclusion to *Romeo and Juliet*:

A glooming peace this morning with it brings.  
The sun for sorrow will not show his head.  
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things.  
Some shall be pardon’d, and some punished.

Or poets can employ *enjambment*, when the sense of one line runs over to the next one, as in the two lines that finish off that conclusion to Shakespeare’s story of his doomed young star-crossed lovers:

For never was a story of more woe  
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

Then there are countless forms and employments of rhyme. Much traditional English poetry uses *end rhyme*, wherein rhyming words (words that have the same concluding sounds) come at the end of each line, as in the old nursery

rhymes, “Five little ducks went out to *play*/Over the hill and far *away*” or, “Hey diddle *diddle*/the cat and the *fiddle*.” Contrast this to *internal rhyme*, in which a word in the middle of a line rhymes with another one at the end of that line or somewhere else in the poem, as in, “Jack *Sprat* could eat no *fat*” or as regularly employed in Shelley’s “The Cloud”: “I am the *daughter* of Earth and *Water* . . . /I pass through the *pores* of the ocean and *shores*.” Alliteration, when initial sounds are repeated (“the *ship* is just *sby* of the *shore*”), is sometimes called a *head rhyme* or *initial rhyme*. A *slant rhyme* (sometimes called *half rhyme*, *near rhyme*, or *off rhyme*) is when only some sounds of words are echoed; this may involve matching consonants (“the road was *bent*/out crawled an *ant*”) or vowels (“the day we *met*/you craned your *neck*”). These are just a few of the most common variations of rhyming, whose pleasures we have known from childhood.

We know about poetry that has rhyme and meter. But poems can also be written in *free verse*, which as the term implies is not bound by any such conventions. Somewhere in between highly structured poetry and free verse is *blank verse*, which has a regular meter but no rhyme. Blank verse has been famously employed in English literature by Shakespeare and Milton, both of whom frequently busted out in iambic pentameter that did not rhyme.

The main building block of the traditional poem is the *stanza*, a unit of meaning often set aside by line breaks that has been compared to prose organizers such as the sentence (when it’s a short stanza) or the paragraph (when it’s a long stanza). Sometimes we name chunks of verse for how many lines they contain, including *couplets* (two rhyming lines that form a unit, as at the end of many acts in Shakespeare’s plays), *tercets* of three lines, and *quatrains* of four.

Poetic types range from the short meditations on nature of the *pastoral* to the mortality-contemplating *elegy*, from the personal and singable *lyric* to the long, heroic narrative of the *epic*. Poetic structures are infinite, from the fourteen-line *sonnet* in its many variations to the seventeen-syllable *haiku*, from the repeating-line *villanelle* to the saucy five-line *limerick*, from the three-line *blues* song pattern to the circular *pantoum*.

By all these devices have writers kept us entranced for ages.

# A Collection of Quotes to Spur Discussion About Formalist Criticism

*The study of literature means the study of literature, not of biography nor of literary history . . . not of anything except the works themselves, viewed as their creators wrote them, viewed as art . . . not as logic, not as psychology, not as ethics.*

—Martin Wright Sampson

*Cutting itself off from all discourse except the poetic, [Formalism] increasingly isolated literary criticism from all other concerns.*

—Catherine Belsey

*It is only when we speak of the form, or the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics.*

—Mark Shorer

*The only reality in literature is form; meaning is a shadow-show.*

—Paul Valéry

*[Formalist criticism] displays an extraordinary lack of interest in what literary works actually say . . .*

—Terry Eagleton

*The truth of a poem is its form and its content; its music and its meaning are the same.*

—Muriel Rukeyser

*since feeling is first  
who pays any attention  
to the syntax of things  
will never wholly kiss you . . .*

—e. e. cummings

# BONUS CHAPTER

## On Postmodern Criticism

*Everything we do in life is rooted in theory.*

—bell hooks

*Theory is all grey and the golden tree of life is green.*

—J. W. von Goethe

*This is a truly exciting time to be alive. As a species, judging by our “postmodern” art . . . we are learning just how completely we create our own reality.*

—Sol Luckman

*Postmodernism cost literature its audience.*

—Scott Turow

In my senior honors English class, we are reading the complex 1994 novel *The Bingo Palace*, one of Louise Erdrich’s series of interlapping fictions set around the Turtle Mountain Indian reservation in North Dakota. I’ve divided the novel into four parts so we can have classroom discussions every other day on sixty-five- to seventy-page chunks of reading. Students lead the first two days’ discussions, and the two discussion leaders have each done a conscientious job of reading and formulating thoughtful questions, but enthusiasm for the book isn’t high and the half-hour chats are listless. I’m signed up to lead the third conversation, so I start thinking about questions and issues I might add to the daily discussion.

One of the angles of inquiry I plan to introduce concerns a misreading. At one point in *The Bingo Palace*, Erdrich’s sweetly clueless protagonist Lipsha Morrisey cites a line from the song “All Along the Watchtower” by Bob Dylan as played by Jimi Hendrix—“There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke”—as a revelation to him. Because I know this song well, I bring in the Hendrix version to play for my students. I’ve always been fascinated that Lipsha focuses on that line and misses the following ones: “But you and I we’ve been through that, and this is not our fate, so let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late.” Thus, Lipsha gets the exact opposite meaning from the song than the one it actually expresses, it seems to me. My students, few of whom know the works of Dylan or Hendrix as many of my generation do, are unaware of this discrepancy until I point it out. So I bring in the Hendrix CD and play the song in hopes that maybe it will lead to some pondering on the ironic gap between Lipsha’s perception and the song’s

actual lyrics in ways that might get us thinking about other misreadings in the novel—and discussing ways we “read” and “misread” literature and sometimes the world.

After I play the tune (with a bit of added air guitar work on the stunning Hendrix licks for amusement value), one of my students says, cleverly, “Speaking of life being a joke, the author played a little joke on *us*.”

“Yeah,” I say. “So why might she have done this? Does it affect your perception of Lipsha?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” he says. “It’s just so . . . postmodern.”

“That’s an interesting response,” I say. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

He stumbles. “Uh, well, I’m not sure. It’s kind of like messing with our ideas of what we think we know.”

*Messing with our ideas of what we think we know.* That, I think, is quite an intriguing definition.

The student continues. “You know, because ‘life is but a joke.’”

And it strikes me: the concept of *postmodern* is definitely part of the atmosphere of my students’ twenty-first-century lives. But what does it mean to them, and to me? These honors English class students have obviously bumped into some references to postmodernism, but maybe I should be offering them a more formal tutorial.

The mere thought warns of headaches ahead. Such a complex body of thinking: Where on earth do I begin?

## An Overview

*Postmodernism* is tricky to define. Ask a dozen scholars to define postmodernism and you’d likely get two dozen different answers—and long-winded ones, at that. Furthermore, there are scads of intellectual *-isms* of the past few decades—structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstructionism, historicism, and more—that are sometimes clumped together under the label of postmodernism and sometimes not, all accompanied by fiery debate. (For this discussion, I’m going to clump many but not all of them together; let the flaming begin.) Nonetheless, postmodernism has constituted an influential set of ideas in the field of literary criticism over recent decades, and our students are inheritors of many of its assumptions and moves, even if not consciously. I think it makes sense to make students conscious of some of the postmodern attitudes and approaches that inform their contemporary culture.

Obviously, *postmodernism* defines itself in terms of *modernism*. Thus, to make a start on the journey of understanding postmodern literary theory, we need to make a brief stop first at the intellectual filling station of modernism.



## The Emergence of Modernism: Certainties in Smithereens

*Modernism . . . may be as important to 21st-century culture as Greek civilization was to the Renaissance.*

—Edward Rothstein

Broadly speaking, the past two millennia in Western or European philosophy (starting from the ancient Greeks and marching down the centuries to our era), have been characterized—for all their diversity—by some common assumptions, most notably a sustaining belief that absolute and coherent truths exist. Whether derived from Plato's philosophy, the tenets of the Judeo-Christian tradition, or Enlightenment beliefs in science and reason, the assumption under which most humans operated (as many if not most still certainly do) has been a sense that there is a larger truth and coherence to the human experience.

In both content and form, art has generally reflected this assumption. Through the end of the 1800s, formal art, including literature, was, for the most part, realistic and representational. Literary creativity and criticism were created on the belief that a writer could capture and bring greater understanding to a slice of reality through traditional conventions of storytelling in fiction and drama and through structures of formal rhyme and meter in poetry.

Then everything blew apart.

“On or about December 1910 human character changed,” the British writer Virginia Woolf famously declared (1966, 422–423), and though her comment may have been tongue in cheek, there's some truth in it. In the early decades of the 1900s, a great tidal change did begin to take place in many realms of human endeavor, a challenge to old conventions, restraints, manners, and authority, all announcing the beginning of the Western cultural revolution we have come since to call *modernism*.

The period spanning the 1890s through the 1920s mark a time when artists in Europe and America were powerfully buffeted by new developments in the wind. Rapidly increasing industrialization, urbanization, and automobile ownership; the spread of new mass media of radio and film; and affordable new consumer technologies—phonograph, telephone, camera, typewriter—changed perceptions of work, family, gender roles, and cultural norms. Provocative new ideas swirled in the air. Albert Einstein's physics scrambled old notions of time and space; Sigmund Freud's psychology proposed new understandings of human behavior; Karl Marx's economic theories shook up assumptions about social class; and German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's thunderous pronouncements questioned the very idea of objective truth.

Then World War I (1914–1918) erupted, a brutal war of inexplicable causes that left 20 million soldiers and civilians dead and led to widespread disillusionment. People who shared the same religion slaughtered one another in this “war to end all wars” that left issues

unresolved and sowed the seeds for conflicts to come. No political system, from monarchy to democracy to communism, seemed capable of thwarting the barbarism. Scientific discoveries appeared to offer humankind mostly more efficient mass-killing methods, from the machine gun to mustard gas. The confidence of people in the systems—political, religious, scientific, artistic—that had once ordered human existence was undermined. Ernest Hemingway famously spoke of “The Lost Generation” to describe those coming of age during these years of shattered faith in old truths and certainties.

From this generation exposed to the blast furnace of history, radical new forms of art and thinking were forged. The decade following World War I—the aptly named Roaring Twenties in the United States—saw an explosion of further innovation in art, architecture, music, philosophy, social theory, and literature. Young artists and thinkers coming of age at this time were cynical about received notions of propriety and the ideals their elders held dear. The world had changed, so the arts would have to change as well. Artists flocked to the cultural centers of Europe, most notably Paris, to join in the fermentation of new ideas. These creative spirits were happy to tweak the noses of the establishment, reject the values of the bourgeoisie, and provoke the public.

As traditional social and religious values of earlier centuries were rejected, so were traditional artistic conventions. Venerable art forms—classical music and dance, representative painting and sculpture, realistic fiction, rhymed and metered poetry—seemed exhausted to many young artists who strove to break free from the old rules, boundaries, and ways of seeing and thinking. As T. S. Eliot wrote, the ordered, stable worldview of the nineteenth century with its faith in inherent meaning could not accord with “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” Established forms of art had only served to stultify humans along with all the other old ways of thinking.

So what were modern artists to do? As the poet Ezra Pound exhorted, “Make it new.” New artistic moves, the Dada artist Hans Arp said, were necessary to help people see in new ways. In painting, sculpture, dance, and music, artists explored form, abstraction, disruption, and cacophony. What we have generally come to call modernism, then, was this break from the past and a shared climate of experimentation in many cultural, artistic, and intellectual fields. This was such a profound revolution that what we today still call “modern art” and “modern dance” are forms that planted their roots during this era.

And how did all this fermentation manifest itself in literature? Many writers of this era were committed to experimentation and to rejecting traditions that seemed too old fashioned for the era of fierce change, forms that seemed too limiting, and messages that seemed too refined or optimistic. The 1920s were the high-water mark of literary modernism. In 1922, T. S. Eliot wrote his revolutionary poem “The Waste Land” and James Joyce his revolutionary novel *Ulysses*. On the continent, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, and others were writing in strikingly new ways while the parade of American expatriates in Paris also caught the modernist fever, including Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Back in the states,

William Faulkner, Hart Crane, e. e. cummings, Wallace Stevens, and many others were also writing in fresh ways. The 1920s are, in fact, considered among the most significant decades in all of American literary history, with many of the innovative products of that era still widely read and taught—some probably in your classroom.

What are some of the artistic moves we associate with modernist writers?

In terms of content, modernist writers struggled with issues of meaninglessness, dislocation, and disillusionment, often dished up without the comfort of happy endings, reaffirmations of goodness or justice, or even the consoling wisdom of traditional tragedy. Literature has since antiquity dealt with life's harsh truths, but this was something seemingly new, a more cynical, world-weary and unheroic view, as expressed strikingly in Eliot's assertion in his poem "The Hollow Men" that even the end of the world would occur "not with a bang but a whimper."

In terms of plot, modernist novelists violated expectations about narrative coherence that stretched back to antiquity. Aristotle, for example, had stipulated in his *Poetics* that a plot must have a sense of wholeness, with a beginning, a middle, and an end revealing a clear cause-and-effect chain of events. Whether heroic quest story, comedy, or tragedy, stories had typically abided by this old tacit agreement between writers and their audiences about coherence and linearity. This agreement was chucked out the window by modernists, many of whose literary experiments were designed to reflect more accurately than carefully plotted chronological narrative what many felt was an out-of-joint world. Experience was portrayed as multilayered, fragmented, elusive, and discontinuous. And modernists were happy to manipulate time in their narratives, interrupting simple chronology with quick cuts and leaps, flashbacks and flash-forwards, and other temporal disruptions and distortions. Writers from Joseph Conrad to Marcel Proust became known for their experiments that dispensed with conventional norms of exposition, causality, and chronology.

In terms of form, fragmentation was central to the modernist aesthetic. The broken planes of Picasso's cubist paintings, the complex rhythms of jazz music, and the montages and quick cuts of the emerging medium of cinema found parallels in the literature of the era. T. S. Eliot's work, like much modernist poetry, divorced itself from the orderly tradition of formal meter and rhyme in favor of free verse, mixed classical allusions, snippets of folk literature and foreign language, historical tidbits, contemporary slang, samples from popular culture, and literary and mythological references. Eliot believed that a poet's job was not to see only the beauty in the world but also its ugliness, boredom, horror, and glory, and his method for capturing all that was this patchwork or pastiche. How else to capture a jangly world than a kaleidoscope of sharp-edged shapes and colors tumbled and retumbled together in incongruent and surprising juxtapositions? In his poetry, e.e. cummings not only dispensed with traditions of capitalization, he cut up his lines and words in surprising ways. John Dos Passos, in his *U.S.A. Trilogy* of novels of the early 1930s, used a cut-and-paste technique, mashing up fictional portraits with actual newspaper clippings and song lyrics, nonfiction mini-biographies of celebrated

citizens of the time, and autobiographical stream-of-consciousness bits. These once-radical techniques of juxtaposition, ambiguity, and multiple points of view have become standard in writers' kit bags since.

Modernist writers challenged traditions of fictional perspective. Many nineteenth-century novelists would offer readers a guide in the form of a trustworthy, all-knowing narrator (no matter whether that authoritative point of view was conveyed in a first-person or a third-person voice) who would tell the story, provide necessary background information, make judgments, and explain the significance or lesson. Meanings and morals would be illuminated through a single, wise point-of-view consciousness. Modernist writers disrupted this convention. For example, Joseph Conrad's protagonist Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) tells his story in a disjointed, hard-to-follow manner and laments at the end that he can't make any real sense of the story nor his actions, other than the fact that they are tormenting him.

In veering away from traditional character development, some novelists attempted to render personality by tracing the direct thought-flow of their protagonists in what has come to be called *stream-of-consciousness* style. Pioneered by modernists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, this impressionistic method sought to replicate the chaotic barrage of unstructured perceptions, associations, memories, impulses, desires, and fears that constitute our consciousness, without avoiding material that was unsettling, unreasonable, and unfathomable. Prodded by the work of Freud to delve into the dark realm of the unconscious, modernist writers adopted this style to more accurately represent the inner psychological experience of humans.

Inner consciousness of the individual was the central focus of many modernists, in contrast to the panoramic examination of society that was so important to earlier writers such as Charles Dickens. Modernism shifted the concern of the novel from the external world to the internal, from the broad scope of the social novel to the endoscope of the interior novel. The concentration changed from *what* one sees to *how* one sees, from narrative action to interior perception. In response to what appeared to be the madness of society, the modernists sought refuge in individual self-awareness rather than in social action. If all the old forms and traditions of public and literary language—rationality, objectivity, coherence—had failed to create a more just and sensible world, perhaps the only truth and authenticity was to be found in the irrational, impressionistic, and subjective realm of the individual consciousness.

Another modernist move was the embrace of mythology. With the influence of Carl Jung's psychology of the collective unconscious and James Frazier's cross-cultural anthropology, as well as a faltering of faith in traditional religions, many writers reached back to ancient mythologies or, like the Irish poet and dramatist William Butler Yeats, created newer versions of old cultural myths as part of their literary work. Modernist writers celebrated the mythic, the primitive, the intuitive, and the irrational, and they sought revelation and epiphany.

Finally, modernists embraced difficulty and complexity. The idea of *defamiliarization* was floating around among Russian intellectuals in the late 1910s. We get habituated to our routines of perception and thought, they believed, falling into unthinking, automatic responses using the shopworn platitudes of the day, servants of traditional assumptions and conventions that spare us from seeing freshly and thinking for ourselves. Thus, the job of artists is to *make it strange*, to embrace new forms and languages that will confound us, that will push accepted ways of coding and understanding the world into crisis, thereby cracking open the mundane and making the world new again. In his 1925 essay “Morality and the Novel,” D. H. Lawrence claimed that “to read a really new novel will always hurt, to some extent. There will always be resistance. The same with new pictures, new music. You may judge of their reality by the fact that they do arouse a certain resistance” (Lawrence 1936, 527). T. S. Eliot, in his 1921 essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” added, “Poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this . . . must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (Eliot 1974b, 40). Eliot and his contemporaries were clearly not worried about making their readers work hard. Their writings are often strange, dense, complex, elusive, and multifaceted, not meant to be easily or quickly understood. Many of modernism’s supreme accomplishments, from “The Waste Land” to Woolf’s *The Waves*, are darned tough reads.

Nevertheless, the modernists’ experiments are still a big part of the contemporary scene. Most consumers of modern culture and media are, whether conscious of the fact or not, conversant and comfortable with the complex moves of modernism that surround us in every medium. Modernist techniques of fragmentation and juxtaposition are commonplace in not only prize-winning literature but also popular films and TV ads.

What kind of literary criticism evolved from modernism? Many modernist artists were themselves literary critics. Virginia Woolf, for example, wrote a powerful essay, “A Room of One’s Own,” that can be read as one of the earliest statements of feminist criticism. And T. S. Eliot was a notable critic. Though he said his criticism was merely a by-product of his poetry, Eliot produced many influential works of criticism that contributed to the thinking of a group of subsequent scholars who came to be known as the New Critics. (Check out Chapter 12, “Formalist Criticism,” for more on them.)

As Terry Eagleton points out in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, young scholars coming of age in the 1920s had to overthrow prior generations of critics who had enshrined the literature of “good taste” (code for poems and stories revolving around elevated thoughts and glorification of the British Empire, in Eagleton’s view), which now seemed inadequate. Given the crises in Western civilization and the way public language had been degraded into a mere instrument of manipulation by the forces of government and commerce, literature seemed a force for truth telling and creativity. Thus, modern literature was not to be judged on its adherence to old conventions but

on its own terms. Critics therefore needed to ignore external traditions and instead pay scrupulous attention to nothing but the “words on the page” (Eagleton 1983, 31–32). Such rigorous critical analysis of formal experimentation was the way to slough off the old skin of Western critical tradition. Thus was the way prepared for the close reading approach of the New Critics. In addition, the strategies of modernist writers—ambiguity, experimentation, and defamiliarization—became ready tools for the postmodern critics we shall soon encounter.

Even with its tradition-exploding experiments, modernism in one important way did not break from the past. Modernist artists affirmed for the most part the old assumption

### **A Collection of Modernist Works to Try with Students**

After students have read about modernism, they can read modernist works and identify some of the moves.

For example, after having senior AP English students read Joseph Conrad’s difficult and controversial *Heart of Darkness* during a sequence of works about Africa, I often have them follow up with T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Hollow Men,” which uses a quote from *Heart of Darkness* as one of its epigraphs. The brief activity of identifying and discussing some of Eliot’s pioneering modernist moves—his use of pastiche, mythology, and high- and low-culture references in the service of his profound disillusionment—gives students an active initial task to keep them engaged as they’re trying to absorb this difficult, elusive poem and make connections between it and Conrad’s novel. They can also include a dissection of Conrad’s modernist moves while they’re at it.

Many of the works, in line with the modernist aesthetic of difficulty, will require homework from students to unpack the allusions.

#### **A Few Poems**

- e. e. cummings, “in Just-,” “l(a,” “old mr ly”
- T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “The Hollow Men”
- Wilfred Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est”
- W. B. Yeats, “Second Coming”

#### **A Few Short Stories**

- Ernest Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants”
- James Joyce, short stories in *The Dubliners*, particularly “A Painful Case”
- Katherine Mansfield, “The Garden Party”
- Virginia Woolf: “Kew Gardens” or “Moments of Being”

that humans could capture and reflect the actual state of that world in their creations. The goal of modernist techniques was to make sense of a world grown increasingly complex, fragmented and difficult to understand. A “brave new world” required brave new art forms to reflect and understand it, and modernist writers and artists sought to create that art.

As happens with many artistic and social movements, however, modernism, after a long run on the intellectual stage, was challenged by a new set of ideas waiting in the wings. A half-century or so after modernism showed up, postmodernism seized the spotlight.

## The Emergence of Postmodernism

*While Modernism thrived on multiple manifestos, postmodernism’s manifesto might be that no manifesto is possible . . . Postmodernism is almost impossible to pin down; like a blob of mercury, it slips away under the slightest pressure, only to pop up again in original form.*

—Edward Rothstein

Though the terms *postmodern* and *postmodernism* (or *pomo* as the concept is often referred to on college campuses, whether fondly or snarkily) have been in contemporary usage since around 1950, they are terms that can still involve some linguistic acrobatics.

Postmodernism by label is defined both in terms of and in contrast to modernism, but that poses complications. In common usage, what is *modern* is not a stable category; what is modern is that which is continually new. But once the specific cultural revolution of the early twentieth century got labeled modernism and then inevitably lost steam, we had to find a new way to define what came next. Hence, *postmodernism*. Thus, modern became the dated and postmodern became the new flavor that might itself soon be dated. So what do we use to label the *next* transformative intellectual and artistic wave? *Post-postmodernism*? *Neo-postmodernism*? And how about the artistic revolution after *that*? *Post-post-postmodernism*? The only thing that can be said in favor of these terminology problems is that they do nicely exemplify the knotty linguistic obsessions of postmodernism.

Let’s get down to brass tacks: postmodernism is a label most commonly affixed to a particular bunch of ideas and attitudes that gathered around café tables in France before migrating to other European and U.S. intellectual hotspots in the second half of the twentieth century. Those ideas captured a couple of generations of scholars, who began to substitute plural literary theories with the capitalized *Theory* to denote these particular strains of postmodern European thinking that coalesced during these Cold War years. When you hear literary scholars talking about Theory in this singular way, they are most likely talking about the specific batch of postmodern beliefs and approaches enumerated later in this section.

For the sake of this discussion, I should note again, I am gathering a bunch of widely varying species of literary criticism into the huge drift net of the label *postmodernism*. Some may reasonably argue that this categorical capturing doesn't discriminate enough between differing schools of critical fish. That is certainly a danger I recognize, but we will sail on, net spread widely.

In any case, in word and deed, postmodernism can be seen as a result of and a response to modernism, an aftershock that started to shake things back up a half-century after the earthquake of modernism first hit.

## Modernism and Postmodernism

Some scholars assert that postmodernism is an extension of modernism, others that it's a rejection of modernism. Probably it's a bit of both.

Modernists began a revolution against many of the comfortable Western artistic and cultural certainties of the past, and postmodernists continued that revolution. Both share a skepticism about older traditions and a vocabulary of *making it strange*. Both movements have a rebellious fervor, and both still have plenty of influence and oomph.

However, even as the modernists sought to subvert and reinvent old traditions, they still paid respect to those traditions. The works of Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Yeats, for example, are steeped in knowledge of the classics and of prior literary conventions. In addition, these pioneering literary modernists believed in the traditional aims of art. They were seeking new artistic traditions to express their dispiriting new world, yet they still aspired to create great, era-defining art that would articulate and give meaning to their age.

Postmodernists, however, do not have such lofty aspirations. At their core, they are skeptical of all those categories so blithely noted in that paragraph you just finished reading—that is, grand ideas such as “artistic tradition,” “great art,” and “giving meaning to an age.”

As Edward Rothstein expresses it, “In Modernism there is a perspective, a frame of reference; in postmodernism there is no frame, no stability: tradition is a collection of trivia. So postmodernism refuses to take anything too seriously. Its mode is play, its attitude ironic. Each work declares: greatness is a delusion, great art a pretense . . . Modernism was haunted by a struggle with disenchantment and a search for new bearings. Pomo said, it's impossible and doesn't matter anyway” (2000, 1). Or, as one explanation I heard put it, the idea that absolute truths are definable belongs to the *realist* tradition, whereas *modernism* explores subjective personal and individual truths and *postmodernism* holds no truths.

Thus, a modernist revolution that questioned old artistic ways in search of a new era's truth was overrun by a postmodernist revolution that questioned the whole endeavor of seeking truth.



## Historical Context of Postmodernism

Postmodern ideas found their stride in France a decade after the end of World War II. The defeat of fascism had brought relief and freedom, but the uncertainties caused by the contradictory facts of French occupation and collaboration as well as the deep anxieties of the Cold War soon replaced this relief. What to some Europeans was the egalitarian promise of communism or Marxism faded in the light of the tyrannous behavior of Joseph Stalin and his dictatorial allies and successors. Colonial wars around the world, including those of the French in Algeria and Vietnam, soured a generation of young people on what seemed to many of their elders appropriate uses of state power. The “good guys” of World War II began to look to some European youth like the new “bad guys.” In such uneasy times, challenging new ideologies emerged.

When these postmodern ideas began immigrating to the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, their transit was eased by similarly disillusioning events on American ground. The optimism of the era of President John F. Kennedy had been obliterated by Kennedy’s assassination and the Vietnam War, the nonviolent success of the civil rights movement was overtaken by Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination and urban rioting, and faith in technological progress was tempered by the negative by-products of technology, including environmental depredations. Hanging over everything was the chilling Cold War threat of nuclear cataclysm.

This new era of social upheaval and disillusionment, much like the atmosphere after World War I that nurtured modernism, opened thinkers to the skeptical ideas of postmodernism.

The high-water mark of postmodern ideas may have been during the 1970s and 1980s (which some scholars refer to as the era of *The Theory Wars*), but postmodern thinking captured the imaginations of a couple generations of scholars and is still part of our contemporary condition.

## Three Big Ideas of Postmodernism

We can, if we squint, perceive some of those hard-to-bring-into-focus ideas that inform much postmodern thinking, most notably analyses of three problems: (1) the importance and simultaneous squishiness of language, (2) the false lure of *grand narratives*, and (3) the role of power in human interactions. Let’s look at these three analyses in turn.

### Addressing the Centrality as Well as the Instability of Language

Since the days of the ancient Greeks, thinkers have been wrestling with the slippery relationship between language and reality. Notions that there are limitations in our attempts

to label and describe existence, that language isn't just a vehicle of thought but the driver, that words may produce our perceptions as well as our perceptions producing our words, and that the medium is the message—these issues have been of interest to philosophers for centuries.

Postmodern thought, however, plops questions of unreliable language onto center stage in the human drama. Or, as Richard Appignanesi and Chris Garratt express it, “Postmodern theory is a consequence of this century’s obsession with language. The most important 20th-century thinkers . . . shifted their focus of analysis away from *ideas* in the mind to the *language* in which thinking is expressed” (1995, 56).

In the pomo view of the cosmos, humans are governed by the structures and limitations of our languages rather than by any eternal truths or essential natures. The seeds for this modern version, this cornerstone idea of postmodern literary theory, were planted in other fields, most notably structural linguistics.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), a Swiss professor of linguistics and founder of the school of thinking that has come to be called *structuralism*, was an early plowherd in this stretch of intellectual dirt. Linguists traditionally have explored the etymologies of individual words and the lineages of particular languages; Saussure sought something more elemental—underlying principles of language, a deeper infrastructure that could describe all language activity. (*Structuralism* has thus come to mean in many academic fields the search for unconscious infrastructures, influences, relationships, and organizing patterns of any cultural phenomenon.) In seeking such a system, Saussure came up with his well-known formulation of a *signifier* (the word *cheese*, for example), which carries meaning, and the *signified*, which is the concept (the idea of cheese) to which the signifier refers; both together constitute a *sign*. Neither the signifier or the signified is the chunk of cheese sitting on a plate; we can't nibble any part of the sign, so this system is wholly abstract. In fact, a signifier (the word *liberty*, say) may refer to a signified (the concept of liberty) that has no concrete object whatsoever attached to it.

In other words, language is largely a self-contained and self-referential system; signs gain meaning from other signs, not necessarily from the material world. In addition, the association between a sound unit and the concept it represents (also known as *signification*) is completely arbitrary. There's no particular reason that what we know as “cheese” shouldn't be called “blimp” or “Arthur” or “huma-numa.” All we have is culturally agreed-on labels that we learn in social practice. It's useful for both you and me (if we're in an English-speaking place) to refer to that little hunk of blue-veined deliciousness sitting next to the crackers as “cheese,” because if what I know as cheese you regularly call “blimp,” we'll have trouble communicating. Thus, in any given social setting, we tend to agree on linguistic conventions. That's the nature of language—it's an abstract and arbitrary social construct.

Furthermore, all our experience is mediated by language. As we walk down the street, our senses take in millions of bits of input—sights, sounds, smells, physical sensations—but we have to translate all that blooming, buzzing confusion into meaningful and

useful knowledge, and we do so by language. In other words, we must turn reality into the symbolic form of our culture's codes and signifying systems. Thus, there is no pure experience of reality; our experience of reality is mediated by language, which is influenced by culturally specific understandings, ideologies, conventions, and traditions to which we are heir. Thus, meaning is not inherent in the world but is the product of our structures—our signifying systems—of representation.

This notion of *structuralism*, which began as a linguistic idea, quickly reached into other disciplines—from anthropology to architecture to literature. (Most postmodern literary moves are considered *poststructuralist* as they push beyond the early boundaries of structuralist thinking into realms of power and politics, as you will soon see.)

Thinkers in other disciplines have confirmed that structuralist ideas are not just matters of words but are elemental to our existence. The American linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and his student Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941), for example, reiterated the argument that the kaleidoscopic mishmash of impressions the world presents to us must be organized by our minds and that the primary means of organization is language. However, they asserted that language does not merely *express* or *reflect* our ideas about reality; rather, it actually *shapes* and *determines* our ideas about reality, thus influencing our understanding of the way the world works. The structure of our language structures our world, or, in other words, our words make our reality.

Observers in many fields have confirmed this idea. For example, observers of infants have long speculated that language may precede thought rather than vice versa. And psychologists have noted the way we label feelings and perceptions affects the way we feel and perceive, as if the self is not just expressed by language but created by it. Nietzsche went so far as to posit that the linguistic structure of subjects and verbs is what allows us to think of the world as separately divided into things and actions.

Anthropologists and linguists confirm that patterns of language use in any community are inextricably tied to the community's most basic and seemingly essential perceptions of the world. For example, the language of debate in certain Asian cultures, I have been told, employs metaphors from dance rather than the warfare metaphors (such as “attacking a position” or “targeting an opponent's point”) that English speakers typically use for debate. The language of the latter feeds the perception that the goal of debate is to smash the opponent because the only options are winning or losing; the language of the former feeds the perception that the goal of debate is to move harmoniously in tune with the other party. This language requires one to think in an entirely different way about how to debate. In such ways does the language of a culture shape the thinking of that culture. Or, as the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) put it, “The limits of our language mean the limits of our world” (Richter 2004, 1). By extension, if we speak a different language, we perceive a different world. A native German speaker once told me her favorite English phrase was learning something “by heart,” which gave me a new insight into what to me was a commonplace expression. Students tackling a new language can attest to the fresh perceptions, viewpoints, and habits of thought—a new and expanded sense of the world—that can be gained.

If language is at the center of our very perceptions of the world, what does it mean that languages are often in perpetual motion, developing and changing over time, subject to misunderstanding and constant reinterpretation? As referents change—words evolve or devolve in meaning, fixed meanings become unglued and misunderstandings multiply—it means our world suddenly looks much less stable and more complicated than we might like to admit.

All this applies to literary texts, which from the postmodern point of view don't only reflect social reality but also help create it, giving shape to the world as much as taking shape from it. And any literary text is complex, taking new contours over time as our consciousnesses take new contours; hence, the endless centuries of reinterpretation of Shakespeare's texts. The word *text* itself, a postmodern favorite, comes from the Latin word meaning *to weave*, and the word expresses this complexity nicely as we consider all the strands of society, history, ideology, and psychology woven into each text and into each reader.

So, postmodern philosophy asserts with great vigor that what permits meaningful thinking is language, even with its arbitrary and unstable structures. Or, in the aphorism usually ascribed to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), language speaks man rather than man speaking language.

Two significant implications have been drawn from this seemingly simple assertion. One has to do with truth, one with power.

## Questioning Ultimate Truths

If our most basic patterns of thought are governed by arbitrary, socially constructed sign systems of language, and if those structures of language change over time and place, then the idea of truth—a construct of language like all ideas—has to be seen as something more fluid and unstable than eternal. If language creates our reality and language is unstable, so is reality.

Yet much of human intellectual history has been involved with the quest to find ultimate truth, to discover comprehensive explanations of the universe. This occurs in many core areas of human inquiry.

Philosophers search for comprehensive explanations or metaphors to describe our condition. Physicists seek a Theory of Everything to encompass all that they know about the complex operations of the cosmos. Historians look for master narratives to explain comprehensibly and to tie together the profusion of events that occur in various eras. Some of our most prominent thinkers have worked hard to formulate large, elegant theories to describe the entirety of their fields: Hegel sought a speculative unity of all knowledge in philosophy, Marx an overarching economic model to liberate humans, Freud a comprehensive model of the human psyche. And, of course, religions offer a comprehensive view of the origins and meanings of the universe.

But postmodern thinkers have challenged this search for what has been called at various times in pomo lingo a *master narrative*, a *grand narrative*, or a *meta-narrative*—

that is, a story to explain all stories, a comprehensive worldview. Based on their ideas of the fluidity of language and therefore truth, postmodern theorists dismiss the effort to find such *totalizing* or *universalizing* ways of envisioning the world. Every one of these efforts does not describe truth, they say, but simply asserts an interpretation.

If through language the human mind imposes its own ways of knowing and believing on the objects of its contemplation, then the world conforms to our minds, not our minds to the world, and what we see is determined by what we believe instead of vice versa. Since reality is what we believe it to be, master narratives do not reflect absolute truth but human subjectivity. Or, as Nietzsche put it, “There are no facts, only interpretations.” Truth thus isn’t something *perceived* by the human mind but something *produced* by the human mind.

Furthermore, our subjective beliefs are all restricted by the limited perspectives of our historic time, community, politics, gender, ethnicity, religion, race, social class, identity, nationality, age, and all the other social and cultural positions we occupy.

In other words, this isn’t just an individual process. We come to our understandings of reality in a social context. Language is community property, and, thus, so is truth. Our notion of the truth, postmodernists assert, is *socially constructed*. Knowledge is determined through social immersion and cultural dialogue. Objectivity is only (in pomo lingo) *intersubjectivity*—a version of reality created by general social agreement. What constitutes truth is relative to the individual or community holding the belief in that truth. There is no objective, value-free inquiry. And with no universal standard for deciding which of many rival interpretations of truth is the correct one, all universals must be false. Or, as the German philosopher Theodore Adorno (1903–1969) is widely quoted as saying, “The whole is the untrue.”

So the big truths or grand narratives we espouse are all functions of our biases in perspective. This is true in all areas of inquiry. In history, governing generalizations are based on ideological prejudices. In psychology, Freud’s theories mask a hidden social agenda of patriarchal privilege. In economics, Marx’s totalizing idea of the liberation of humanity through communism provides a rationale for totalitarian power grabs. Such master narratives are all houses of cards, carefully constructed on nothing—or perhaps only on a will for power, as will be discussed momentarily—and apt to crumble on a little prodding, according to postmodern thinkers. Thus, the postmodern attitude starts with great skepticism about the search for any ultimate truth.

This central tenet of postmodern analysis is a radical departure from most Western or European thinking over the past two millennia, which has assumed that we live in an inherently meaningful and coherent universe. In the postmodern cosmos, truth is always fluid, unstable, relative, subjective, and socially constructed. If reality can’t be made sense of in any absolute way, all our constructions are really just matters of personal or cultural bias. Thus, in our essentially chaotic and incoherent world, our explanations of truth are actually attempts to define the situation in ways that are to our benefit. This is the political dimension of postmodern thinking.

## Acknowledging the Reality of Power Struggles

If all truth is a matter of subjective interpretations, then all truth-defining behavior is really an attempt to convince others of the legitimacy of a particular view of the world. In other words, assertions of Ultimate Truth are basically an attempt to seize the narrative and gain an advantage. All grand narratives are self-justifying myths. Whenever we hear people talk about things “everyone knows are true,” we better watch out, because they’re trying to bend us to their ways of seeing things to justify and legitimize their own particular projects. We all seek to assert our own position in a society, seeking social validation for our views and behaviors. All our notions of what is “proper,” “universal,” “natural,” or “true” are really interpretations that we are seeking to convince ourselves and others are absolute—all to earn or maintain our power, position, and privilege. In postmodern analysis, there is no universal truth, only competing truths. And, as Nietzsche believed, at the heart of all our relations is a hunger for power.

The French postmodern philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (1926–1984) was particularly interested in power and the way power is intertwined with language and with *discourse*, which is pomo-speak for the language of any particular practice of interpretation or any particular vantage point on life. Thus, we can speak of the discourse of university historians or the discourse of political conservatives or liberals or the discourse of cable news networks. These languages all have their own unwritten rules and norms, and they all have a viewpoint around which they are trying to mold the world. They are not neutral descriptions.

Foucault noted that historical periods come to be dominated by a particular narrative that defines events through its particular blinders and assumptions. That *dominant discourse* is often slapped with the label *hegemony*, an old Greek word that today denotes a controlling influence or authority over others by a ruling elite that spins the truth its way, seizing control of a culture through its most cherished beliefs and stories in ways more subtle and profound than mere coercion. That controlling narrative necessarily includes some stories and excludes others, suppressing what does not comfortably fit, defining what is legitimate, sane, or reasonable and what is not, causing people to subordinate their perceptions to that acceptable “common wisdom” or accepted history by a subtle process of definition and conformity. Since grand narratives pretend there is an order to the universe, they must eliminate any disorder—that is, anything outside the mainstream narrative.

However, say postmodern thinkers, there is no such singular narrative of human wisdom, truth, or history, only a vast collection of complex, interactive, diverse human stories, a multiplicity of small local narratives, some which have been legitimized and some which have been marginalized, ignored, or actively suppressed.

Power is therefore mostly about controlling the narrative. We can easily see this principle in operation in the world of contemporary political discourse where operatives want to “spin” a story their direction or “frame” a discussion in terms favorable to their

views. In 2002, for example, Ron Suskind, a Pulitzer Prize–winning senior national affairs reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, reported that a high official in the Bush administration told him in a conversation that journalists like Suskind were in “what we call the reality-based community,” which this powerful official defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality. . . . That’s not the way the world really works anymore. We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality” (2004).

Postmodern thinkers do not see this attitude as limited to just the political community. *All* discourse is suspect in the postmodern conception. Knowledge is not seen as a pure body of information that validly describes an objectively understandable world but is regarded as just another commodity to be managed for advantage and gain. Thus, there are no *innocent* writings or readings: all are *implicated* or immersed in a particular point of view.

Some of our most cherished grand narratives are dismissed by postmodern thinkers. In their 1947 work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, Theodore Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) described reason, that wonderful human capacity set on a pedestal by Western philosophers as the great force of human liberation from superstition, in much more sinister terms—as an imperialist Eurocentric discourse that has proven racist and enslaving in seeking to impose its form of consciousness on other ways of understanding the world practiced in other cultures.

Even an endeavor as seemingly objective as scientific inquiry cannot be truly pure, according to the postmodern point of view. The positivist presumption that the scientific method is rational and objective is challenged by postmodern thought. We are aware of the “observer effect” in experimental science (somewhat akin to German physicist Werner Heisenberg’s *uncertainty principle*), the notion that the act of observation and the tools used to observe a phenomenon can themselves alter the phenomenon being observed, but what is seen as a technical matter by scientists is seen as a political matter by postmodern theorists.

Scientists are like the rest of us, they say, influenced by common biases of the day, prevailing trends in thinking, and subtle pressures from funding sources. Scientists’ own needs and blinders will thus affect their scientific observations. They are all members of some establishment or institution that seeks to perpetuate itself, maintain its power and perks, and dominate others in its description of the universe. Thus, even something that seems as objective as scientific truth should be more accurately seen as a human construct with a political agenda. Scientists are no different than lawyers, doctors, teachers, business people, politicians, citizens, everyone; we are all using language to reinforce our own agendas and worldviews.

This is true of literary writers, too. As with political speeches and scientific assertions, literary texts are composed from the discourses of their day, crafted out of the beliefs and values of particular viewpoints from particular times in particular societies. Literary works assert a belief system and a way of defining the human condition no less than any other text.

In postmodern thought, we cannot extricate ourselves from power struggles inherent in our use of language to define our world.

## What Postmodernism Does

In the light of these three basic notions of most postmodern thought, what does a postmodern critic do?

If language is unstable and arbitrary, if any explanation of meaning is a falsification because there are no universal or essential truths or coherent absolute standards valid for all people, and if all discourse is ultimately about gaining and keeping power, where does that leave us?

On a mighty narrow precipice, a scoffer might say. If postmodernism rejects all worldviews, it cannot offer a worldview. If it challenges all dogma, it cannot be a dogma. If it disdains all theories, why the heck all this talk of Theory?

The answer of postmodern thinkers: their work is not a theory but a *practice* of ongoing investigation and challenge. They don't have a new master narrative or grand theory, just a revolution of permanent *deconstruction*. (There's more on deconstruction to follow.) Creating a new order is not the postmodern goal; disruption and subversion of existing orders and traditions is closer to the mark. Thus, the responsibility of the postmodern critic is to question all meta-narratives, to expose and critique myths masquerading as truths, to treat received ideas skeptically, to bring a chorus of excluded voices into dialogue with whoever holds the megaphone of power, to examine not reality but what is said about reality, to take all socially constructed sureties and hierarchies and deconstruct them. Sometimes this is called *problemitizing* an issue, which means exposing the problems or *foregrounding* what has been hidden, including the inevitable gaps, contradictions, and *silencings* behind any assured expressions of truth. Postmoderns take much of what most folks in any given context comfortably agree is true and make it a *site of contestation*.

So how does a postmodern perspective work in respect to literature? Let's examine postmodernism first in relation to literary production and second in relation to critical approaches.

### Postmodern Moves by Writers

Those folks who plop themselves at desks and start penciling words on pads or tapping on computer keyboards in the hopes of crafting great works of literature are as susceptible to the prevailing winds of fashion as the rest of us. So, it's no surprise that writers for the last half-century have been buffeted and affected by the gale of postmodernism.

In many noteworthy stories and novels, authors of the past few decades have acted on all the basic postmodern impulses: a fascination with the abstract and unstable nature



of language and a resulting sense of the fluidity of truth, a distrust of meta-narratives (and what else is a novel but a grand narrative trying to bring meaning and sense to reality?), and a suspicion that tradition is just another way to consolidate power—with a resulting willingness to challenge, subvert, and deconstruct all the old assumptions about how literary art should work. And there is usually a high level of self-consciousness, irony, and often playfulness in these moves. The works of postmodern icons such as the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) and the Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) are brimming over with riddles, wordplay, labyrinths, mirrorings, and other literary twists and turns.

American novelist, philosopher, and critic William H. Gass (1924–) minted a term in the early 1970s, *metafiction*, to describe a wave of experimental stories and novels that directly challenged some timeworn truisms of fiction. Central to the tradition of literary realism has been the conviction that a mark of quality is the plausibility of the fictional world created (a sense conveyed by the old word *verisimilitude*) as well as the notion that writers should not reveal themselves too much because of the risk of breaking the illusion of plausibility. According to this venerable standard, readers enjoy the enchanting, magical edifice of fiction but don't want to see the wizard behind the curtain. Gass and some of his most prominent contemporaries challenged these ideas. In their metafiction, they regularly pull back that curtain, reminding readers that they are being manipulated by an act of language.

A good example is a short story that I have used a couple of times with my high school students, John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse." Barth, a scholar as well as a novelist, wrote a much-talked-about article in *The Atlantic* in 1967 titled "The Literature of Exhaustion," in which he asserted that conventional modes of fictional representation had been used up and new modes needed to be created, which was his artistic aim. In "Lost in the Funhouse," Barth ventures one new way of creating a fiction. Barth's tale spotlights a thirteen-year-old protagonist named Ambrose who goes to the local amusement park with his family. As he spins his story, the author also simultaneously comments in almost every paragraph on the art of spinning stories. After some lively descriptive detail, for instance, Barth notes dryly, "Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction." And then he adds more such details. Or, at a crucial scene, Barth interjects, "There's no point in going farther; this isn't getting anyone anywhere" (1969, 80). And then he jumps to the next scene. At another juncture, the author even draws a diagram of the arc of conventional narrative (rising action, climax, etc.) and then discusses how his story doesn't fit that old pattern. Sometimes "Lost in the Funhouse" seems almost more interested in the mechanics of storytelling than the revelation of character, though a moving human story abides at the heart of Barth's little tale.

What's the purpose of this ironic wink at the reader, this act of simultaneously commenting on a story's crafting while spinning it out, this self-conscious performance of exposing the magic trick while in the act of performing it—even when the reader

may just simply want to enjoy the illusion? The aim is to pose questions about literary art. This kind of *reflexive* stance, where one simultaneously writes and then comments on the writing, combines the creation of fiction with the examination of criticism—merging art and theory, in effect. By drawing attention to the artificiality of the whole fictional endeavor, metafiction doesn't only examine the world—the task that fiction has traditionally set out to accomplish—but it also examines the art form of fiction, questioning it as another system of meaning, thus posing questions about the relationships between life and art, reality and fiction.

What was radical in 1960s metafiction has become a common set of contemporary literary moves. Here is an attempt to further catalog some of those moves (remembering with a raise of the eyebrows that from a postmodern perspective all such categorization is necessarily arbitrary and unstable).

Postmodern literature often gleefully messes with language, confirming the view of language as central to our understanding of the world while being at the same time an artifice. We can use John Barth again as an example. In his 1968 collection of loosely connected short stories, *Lost in the Funhouse*, the author relentlessly distorts the conventions of language and literature—as if in an amusement park hall of mirrors. His opening “Frame Tale” directs the reader to take scissors to a printed strip on the book's first page, snip it out, then bend and glue it into a Möbius strip that will read endlessly over and over again, “Once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time . . .” Another of the works in *Lost in the Funhouse*, “Menelaid,” packs tales within tales within tales, like one of those Russian matryoshka nesting dolls, each story-within-a-story indicated by new quotation marks, until the reader encounters ridiculous lines with seven or eight sets of them. By his experiments, Barth plays games with punctuation and other conventions and thus violates our expectations about how short stories should work.

Postmodern literature does a lot of this sort of violation of expectation, deconstructing willy-nilly many of the traditions of literary realism, thus bringing into question how the old conventions filter reality.

We may have a sense that there should be a careful boundary between authors and their characters, but many best-selling contemporary writers (Philip Roth, Jonathan Safran Foer, Paul Auster) have named characters in their fictions after themselves, confounding biographical critics and the rest of us with questions of where the author ends and the character begins. In his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (chosen by *Time Magazine* as one of the 100 best English-language novels written between 1923 and 2005), Kurt Vonnegut blurs the distance between himself and his protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, both having had the same experiences as American prisoners-of-war during the bombing of Dresden, Germany, during World War II. And Tim O'Brien's character (named Tim O'Brien) in *The Things They Carried* shares many of the experiences in Vietnam that O'Brien himself actually had as a soldier there. Readers are forced to continually ask, Are Tim O'Brien's and Kurt Vonnegut's war stories true or invented? And in what ways might fiction be

truer than truth? These two author-veterans have inserted themselves into their narratives to deconstruct traditional war stories and comment on old truisms about war, heroism, and memory.

We may have a sense of the trustworthiness of traditional objective and omniscient narration, but many best-selling contemporary writers deconstruct that notion, undermining the authority of the all-knowing narrator—and thus undermining trust in all authority. For example, in his magnificent 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (another of those 100 best novels), John Fowles uses for most of the book a traditional, disembodied, seemingly objective third-person narration. However, at a couple of points in the novel, the narrator actually shows up as a character, to the reader's surprise. Toward the end of the novel, this voice unexpectedly derides the novel's ending as contrived, then flips a coin to decide in which order he will present two alternatives to that initial ending. After the first alternative conclusion, this unknown person (is it the author? a character?) sets his pocket watch back fifteen minutes to offer the second alternative. So which of the three endings is the “real” one? This narrator also complains at times that his protagonist is disobedient, a character out of control. All this business applies torque to the whole convention of an omniscient and omnipotent *author* and leaves us questioning the ways in which we grant writers *authority*.

A more recent popular example of such deconstruction of authority is Ian McEwan's magnificent 2002 novel *Atonement* (yet another of those 100 best novels). In it, the author presents three sections. The first, set on a great English estate in the country, reads like a lush, realistic, old-fashioned Victorian novel of the landed gentry. The second section is a gritty, realistic war story. The final section is a postmodern reinterpretation of all that has happened from the point of view of an important character in the first two sections, a writer of fiction who calls into question everything that has been told us so far.

Postmodern literature also often comments on or deconstructs specific past masterworks of literature. This interaction and mutual commentary between texts is sometimes called *intertextuality*, the idea that there's always a dialogue between new and old works. Tom Stoppard's wacky 1966 stage play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* takes those two minor characters from *Hamlet* and gives them their own play occurring behind the scenes but sometimes intersecting with Shakespeare's tragedy, a comic inverse in which these two clowns learn that their free will is forever bound by the fact that they can't ever break the shackles of Shakespeare's script. And the 1986 novel *Foe* by Nobel Prize-winning South African author J. M. Coetzee's reimagines Daniel Defoe's classic novel *Robinson Crusoe* from the point of view of a woman, Susan Barton, cast away on the same island but ignored in the original telling. This new version of the famous shipwreck tale gives Coetzee a chance to examine issues of storytelling, power, language, gender, race, and colonialism—both adding to, echoing, and challenging the original text.

In another move, postmodern literature often messes with conventional genre boundaries. For example, Nabokov's eccentric 1962 book *Pale Fire* (yet another of

those 100 best novels) has as its center a long, beautifully moving poem in rhymed couplets, written by a now-deceased poet about the suicide of his daughter. The poem is surrounded by a dense superstructure of commentary, a comically pompous work of literary criticism by a buffoonish and self-deceiving scholar who reveals—in his footnotes—his own preposterous life story as a deposed European monarch in hiding as an American academic. Or maybe he’s just a raving lunatic. Is *Pale Fire* a tragic poem, an intellectual treatise about that poem, a comic novel about self-delusion, a satire of academia? Uh, yes. All of the above, and more.

Italian writer Umberto Eco’s 1980 worldwide best seller *The Name of the Rose* is a murder mystery (with a detective-like character, William of Baskerville, slyly named after a Sherlock Holmes story) set in a fourteenth-century Italian monastery, giving Eco the opportunity to bring in medieval theological debates, Biblical analyses, historical details, commentaries on contemporary Italian politics, and musings on semiotics and literary theory, all of which play significant parts in solving the mystery. And Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* mixes a grisly war story with science fiction elements. His character, Billy Pilgrim, has become “unstuck in time” twenty years after his war experience and regularly visits the little green people on the planet Tralfadore. The novel itself is unstuck in time, eschewing any linear narrative for the rapid movement from past to present to future and from biography to fantasy. This is playfulness in the ironic service of Vonnegut’s dead-serious theme of the costs of war.

In these experiments, we also see a challenge to old distinctions between so-called *high art* (the serious novels, plays, and epic poems we often call *classics*) and *low* or *popular art* (the science fiction, detective procedurals, and romance novels we often treat as mere escapism) and the mash-up of seriousness with playfulness. The questions these genre-bending texts pose: Who made these distinctions between high and low art? Why are they necessary? Whose interests do they serve?

Furthermore, postmodern literature often gives voice to the voiceless. For example, the 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (yet another of those 100 best novels), by the French Dominican writer Jean Rhys, takes the “madwoman in the attic” character from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and gives to this woman, who is only a disquieting nonentity in one of the English language’s most enduring and beloved novels, a story and a voice—all with a postcolonial twist that locates the dashing Mr. Rochester’s problem with his locked-up wife as partly due to her mixed-race background.

In another move, many works of postmodern literature kick the sands of time over the traditional line between fiction and history, bringing into question the old assumption that history must *be* verifiably true while fiction just needs to *seem* true. Both forms of writing, some postmodern critics would observe, are just signifying systems, constructions; all narratives of whatever form are interpretations of the truth, and history is no more conclusive than fiction. For example, in his popular 1975 novel *Ragtime* (another of those 100 best works) set in the early 1900s in New York City, E. L. Doctorow has fictional characters interacting with actual historical personages—Houdini, Booker

T. Washington, Henry Ford, Emma Goldman—all with the same believability. Such a work poses a thorny question: Are our historical characters as much fictions (of our own projections or their own image-making apparatus) as our fictional characters?

In all these ways and more, postmodern narratives call into question the whole endeavor of creating narratives. Thus, we have become used to encountering works such

### **A Collection of Postmodern Works to Try with Students**

After students have studied postmodernism, they can read texts that display postmodern moves and identify those moves.

#### **Postmodern Short Stories**

- Margaret Atwood, “Happy Endings”
- John Barth, “Lost in the Funhouse”
- Spencer Holst, “On Hope”
- Joyce Carol Oates, “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life over Again”
- Grace Paley, “A Conversation with My Father”

#### **Postmodern Novels (most for very sophisticated and motivated students)**

- Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*
- J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*
- E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*
- Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*
- Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*
- John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*
- John Gardner, *Grendel*
- Ian McEwan, *Atonement*
- David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*
- Haruki Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*
- Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato, The Things They Carried*
- Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*
- Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*
- Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions, Slaughterhouse-Five*

#### **Play**

- Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

as Italian writer Italo Calvino's 1979 *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, a novel about a reader reading a novel ("this one you are holding in your hands"). Every other chapter is in second person, addressing "you," a reader reading a novel by Italo Calvino and having an adventure, and the alternating chapters are the unfinished opening chapters of ten different novels of widely differing style and subject matter and genre. It's fun and frustrating, a fascinating ride in which questions of objectivity and meaning, art and life, reader and writer are stirred up into a unique postmodern brew.

Many more popular writers of the past few decades, including such best-selling favorites as Dave Eggers, Don DeLillo, Haruki Murakami, and David Mitchell—have produced literature reflecting postmodern ideas.

Some theorists have argued that the label *literature* should be reserved for texts with a postmodern self-consciousness. The Russian linguist and structuralist literary critic Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), who migrated to Prague in the 1920s, Copenhagen in the 1940s, and eventually the United States to teach at Harvard, was one thinker who made this case. Jakobson suggested that every literary text is an artifice, a highly crafted *simulacrum* of reality. The more a work *confesses* this—by self-consciously acknowledging its *textuality* in all the ways mentioned earlier—the more it reflects the mediated experience of reality and deserves the appellation of great literature. Texts that pretend to reflect reality without any self-aware expression of their artificiality, that presume to disguise their *constructedness*, that maneuver readers into singular interpretations—these sorts of texts invite postmodern critics to roll up their sleeves and start exposing the lies: to begin, that is, deconstructing.

And as a final note to this discussion of postmodern influences on literary art, some would say that there is little unique in the experiments of these authors noted earlier. Postmodern ideas—messing with conventions, violation of readers' expectations of coherence, focus on ambiguity and uncertainty, playfulness—can be found in some of the earliest European fictional works, from Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (dating to the early 1600s) to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (from the mid-1700s, and a work that Italo Calvino said was the "undoubted progenitor of all avant-garde novels of our century"). From this point of view, there is nothing new under the sun.

## Postmodern Moves by Readers and Critics

As we find postmodern ideas in many recent literary works, we can also locate in much recent criticism postmodern ideas about the instability of language, the untrustworthiness of grand narratives, and the influence of power relations in all discourse.

A postmodern sense of the radical arbitrariness and subjectivity of language means that ultimately all reading leads to *enigma*, the sense that a text will never surrender itself to our need for perfect clarity. Texts—artifacts of language—are seen as shifty, unstable, and endlessly open to question, thus detonating many prior assumptions about

literary creation. One of those old assumptions is that admirable texts have a quality of coherence—an internal consistency that leads toward a single essential interpretation. Another assumption is that a text's essential interpretation is stable and will remain so across different readers and eras. Postmodernism challenges both these assumptions with the conviction that we can never get to the ultimate meaning of a text. This is good news and bad news; eternal interpretive uncertainty means we get to deal with both the never-ending excitement and the never-ending anxiety of knowing that there's always more to be known—and more to be misunderstood.

A postmodern sense about the untrustworthiness of grand narratives leads to a critical impulse to examine and expose the contradictions built into any narrative, including literary narratives. These contradictions have linguistic roots with both psychological and cultural branches. Writers may think they are in complete control of the texts they write, but postmodern critics see texts as elaborate disguises masking both unconscious desires and anxieties of an author (see Chapter 5, "Psychological Criticism" for more on this) as well as unresolved conflicts of the author's society.

Conflicting readings of a text may reflect these subterranean personal and social conflicts. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* may be the ultimate example. Great debates rage about whether this difficult novel of Marlowe's trip up the Congo River is essentially racist or antiracist, and though we might prefer to stake a claim for one position or the other, a postmodern reading will identify all of the elaborate ironies and tensions of this tale. While Conrad's protagonist directly criticizes the European colonizing of Africa, he participates in that project and unconsciously adopts many of its racist attitudes, locating his story inside the groupthink of the day while appearing to stand outside it—both participant and critic, insider and outsider. In such ways may any narrative display contradictions. No matter how calm, clear, and self-assured a text may appear on its surface, the persistent postmodern reader can peel away the mask to see the personal and social tensions smoldering underneath. Challenging a text's surface assumptions is sometimes called *turning a text against itself* but is more commonly known as *deconstruction*, which gets a longer look below.

The postmodern interest in power dynamics leads to other projects of postmodern literary criticism. One such project has been challenging the traditional Western literary canon, asking in which ways those texts considered "great works"—or those texts taught in the high school curriculum—might simply reflect systems of power and perception that *marginalize* too many voices. Another such project has been the challenging of traditional meanings that have been assigned to canonical texts in a process sometimes called *resistant reading*.

These are some of the critical fruits produced by the seeds of postmodern philosophy.

## Benefits of Postmodernism

Postmodernism, say some of its protagonists, fits literature as neatly as tongue-in-groove woodwork. In his approachable writings, for example, the American pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007) lauded literature as a grand expression and tool of postmodern thought, for a number of reasons.

If he were to create a utopia, Rorty said, he wouldn't elevate philosophers or scientists, who seek universal truths and the all-encompassing abstractions of grand narratives, but would elevate poets and novelists, who focus on the specific and local. By their close attention to the particular, poets and novelists remind us that there are many different ways of describing the world and not just One True Story. In this vein, I recall the excitement of one of my students while reading the 2003 novel *The Kite Runner*, happy at the way the story gave her a counternarrative to the narrow impression she'd had of Afghanistan (based on TV news snippets and "what everyone knows," or the prevailing discourse) as simply a brutal, backward tribal wasteland. Khaled Hosseini's portrayal gave her a far richer, more nuanced understanding of the culture, history, varied viewpoints, and complicated, multiple forces at play in that beleaguered nation. The complexity and multiplicity embraced by literature fits nicely with postmodernism's embrace of those same qualities.

In addition, according to Rorty, poets and novelists by their originality and inventiveness continually renew our language, create new metaphors, coin fresh expressions, and thus foster new ways of thinking and new descriptions of the self, the world, and the human condition. In other words, literary artists are habitually involved with that defamiliarization of language that postmodern philosophers tout in their usually far more deadening prose.

Finally, says Rorty, novelists in particular have the habit of empathy—that is, of trying to understand characters who are not the author—a quality essential for moral progress. In a 1991 essay, Rorty wrote, in the most pragmatic vein, "When you weigh the good and the bad the social novelists [such as Dickens] have done against the good and the bad the social theorists have done, you find yourself wishing that there had been more novels and fewer theories" (1991, 80). And at the end of his life, facing terminal cancer, Rorty, one of the most well-regarded recent philosophers and postmodern thinkers, said he wished he had spent more of his life reading poetry than philosophy.

Another benefit of postmodernism is that it supports many of the practices we seek to nurture in our language arts classrooms, particularly lively discussions and debates about books. Postmodern Theory views literature not as a body of objective knowledge or a set of texts with singular meanings but as an *arena of social practice* within which meanings are negotiated and fought over. The disputatious attitudes of postmodernism can support the idea of a lively democratic classroom. They certainly question any notion



that a text has one meaning that a teacher should be imparting to students. The core activity of postmodern reading is the ceaseless questioning of conclusions.

The final claim for postmodernism is the most expansive one. Postmodern habits of carefully examining and questioning language, narratives, and power relations have implications outside the pages of literary texts. The focus on language can encourage students to pay more attention to the uses and manipulations of language in the public sphere. The focus on power can encourage students to pay more attention to politics and the way socially constructed narratives are used to guide and narrow thinking. This crossroads of language and power is a good place for students to start seeing the connection between English class and the wider world of political, cultural, and social issues.

From its earliest forebears, postmodern Theory expanded its concerns far beyond the boundaries of books and classrooms. Going back again to the work of the Swiss structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure (where much of this postmodern business got jump-started), we can trace an application of linguistic principles to larger cultural issues. De Saussure extended his thinking about structures of language to structures of cultural production, viewing culture itself as a system of signs to be decoded. This analysis was furthered by people like the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908), who noted that all cultures are bound together by systems of signs whose “grammar” we can describe. No cultural action—what clothes and ornaments we wear, what gestures we use, what tools we use, what food we eat, what rituals we undertake, what behaviors we praise or condemn—is essentially natural or intrinsic, according to this viewpoint.

All cultural acts are socially constructed forms of discourse, systems of meaning built on shared conventions. Thus, everything must be interpreted. Out of such notions was developed the science of *semiotics*, the study of cultural sign systems. In this light, everything becomes a *text*, because any human activity or product can be *read*—that is, examined, explicated, and deconstructed. Thus, the concept of a text has been stretched beyond just *written* texts to any form of interpretation and practice. Literature is this simply one kind of text or form of discourse with its own distinctive qualities. And the postmodern project encourages us and our students to decode not just literature but *anything*: advertising, iPods, Las Vegas, sagging pants, political rhetoric, fast-food trends, the NBA, Barbie dolls, professional wrestling and Roller Derby, anime, the concept of “cool,” popular TV shows, ideas about love, architecture, PowerPoint thinking, the Miss America contest, movies, American classroom conventions, Disneyland, beer ads, high school football games, tattoos, notions of celebrity, hairdos, notions of beauty, graffiti, the phonebook, the Super Bowl, automobile models. The field of *cultural studies* has grown up as a postmodern academic discipline parallel to literary studies, with an openness to examining all cultural practices and their structures, their uses of language, and their relationship to power and politics. This is what has caused the idea of deconstruction to send ripples into so many different streams of study starting from the ponds of linguistics and philosophy.

Thus, postmodernism invites us to read our culture with the same attention and awareness with which we read our books. It is a strategy of consumership as well as of reading.

## Limitations and Critiques of Postmodernism

*In literary studies . . . the last several decades have witnessed the baleful reign of “Theory,” a mash-up of Derridean deconstruction, Foucauldian social theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis and other assorted abstrusities, the overall tendency of which has been to cut the field off from society at large and from the main currents of academic thought, not to mention the common reader and common sense. Theory, which tends toward dogmatism, hermeticism, hero worship and the suppression of doctrinal deviation—not exactly the highest of mental virtues—rejects the possibility of objective knowledge and, in its commitment to the absolute nature of cultural “difference,” is dead set against the notion of human universals. Theory has led literary studies into an intellectual and institutional cul-de-sac, and now that its own energies have been exhausted (the last major developments date to the early ’90s), it has left it there.*

—William Deresiewicz

For all its influence, postmodernism has, like any prominent body of thought, attracted plenty of critics.

One objection is to what some might see as a fundamental philosophical error: As postmodernism attacks grand narratives, it promotes its own narrative, disdaining truisms with its own core truisms, mainly the three we’ve discussed: (1) that language is inherently untrustworthy, (2) that all grand narratives are social constructions to be held suspect, and (3) that power is the prime mover of reality. The assertion that absolute truths are impossible is itself an absolute. Such philosophical contradictions may undercut postmodernism’s validity—though for some postmodern thinkers, it’s part of the hilarious playfulness of the discipline.

Other critics object to what they see as the postmodern urge to intellectually contain literature’s power, particularly its ability to stimulate rapture, passion, empathy, and agitation. Writer Ron Rosenbaum, for example, in his fascinating 2006 book *The Shakespeare Wars*, says, “Theory was a scaffolding that distanced and protected one from a direct encounter with the abyss [the identity-shattering, thought-provoking challenge of great literature]; no, you don’t have to gaze upon it, at the radiant literary work itself, you just have to look down upon the foolish or venal reasons some people want you to believe it’s important . . . Many felt the need to find distance and the illusion of mastery over this threat by using the leaden jargon of Theory to shield themselves from the virtually radioactive danger of bottomless pleasure” (2006, 19). Rather than submitting

to these powerful literary experiences, Rosenbaum says, Theory tries to force literature to submit to its constructs.

In his 2002 volume *Genius*, Harold Bloom makes a similar point. Postmodern attempts to convince us the author is irrelevant are little more than pathetic attempts to ward off the terrifying force of genius, Bloom says. Avid readers willingly and happily surrender to an author's voice and vision. Rosenbaum and Bloom express a suspicion that postmodern theorists just flat-out don't like literature. When interrupted by Theory, what can the enraptured reader say? *Okay, literary texts are merely provisional artifacts, linguistic constructs implicated in their historical eras, falsely seeking to represent an unknowable reality. All right, I get it. Now, can I please just get back to my book?*

Yet another common objection to Theory is a gripe about the bewilderingly obscure language that characterizes much postmodern prose, which I have seen referred to as *pomo-babble*, the dense jargon (thick with words like *valorization*, *transgressive*, *narrativity*) appearing to some skeptics as armor necessary to protect and give the illusion of solidity to what is really under the clanking plates a puny body of ideas.

As has been noted, proponents defend the unfamiliar language as necessary to shake readers free of comfortable patterns of thinking. Radical new thinking requires radically new language, the argument goes; prose that readers regard as "plain" or "clear" is usually so because it consists of handy, pre-prepared and neatly packaged phrases and truisms we can just grab off the shelf of contemporary culture, ideas that have been produced for us by others, mass-market commodities we can serve up without doing any intellectual cooking of our own. Hence, we need language that is difficult and new, a language that rebels against old standards and tests limits of what can be thought and articulated.

These may be valid points, say critics, but what may have begun as a genuinely radical attempt to renovate literary language has deteriorated into an insider's jargon that is so abstract and off-putting it has divorced itself from the interests and abilities of most readers. What began as a lively field of inquiry has calcified into a rigid orthodoxy centered in universities.

The professionalization and specialization of literary criticism has left many readers, particularly impressionable students, feeling like amateurs. How can students feel like competent, empowered readers in the face of the aggressive, indecipherable analyses of postmodernism? How can students be motivated when they can't understand what's being said? How can anyone but an expert use such an obscure and esoteric set of practices?

In trying to analyze the steep, prolonged decline in the number of students majoring in English Literature in college over the past couple of decades, some analysts have even charged postmodern Theory as being the prime suspect in the murder of literature study. One of my own excellent students—a voracious reader and enthusiast of books and ideas—went off to college planning to be an English major but bailed out after a year because of the way, he said, the hothouse theoretical atmosphere was killing the beauty of literature. He had to stop studying literature, he told me sadly, to salvage his love for it.

All these criticisms lead to this common political indictment of postmodernism: though postmodern Theory began as a radical critique of society, it has by its habits betrayed its origins. If a professoriate has control over interpretation, readers aren't encouraged to cultivate their own powers of analysis. (This critique has echoes of Martin Luther's protestations that common folks were disempowered when all texts and interpretations were left in the hands of the high priesthood of the medieval church.) If academic writing is too esoteric to be understood by most, readers aren't motivated to action. If the main focus of postmodern Theory is abstract matters of language and structure, readers are removed from the important social, political, moral, and psychological issues that literature poses. If postmodern Theory draws attention to the artificiality of literature, the attention of readers is drawn away from the examinations of society and self that are the aim of many writers.

The influential critic Terry Eagleton offers another criticism in his indictment of the postmodern field of cultural studies in his 2003 book *After Theory*. What should be a lively political discipline, Eagleton says, has declined into shallowness, becoming a home for academic preoccupations with the most trivial aspects of pop culture—body piercing, Madonna concerts, celebrity, TV shows, and advertising. This and the postmodern cynicism about common values and coherent historical narratives have turned people away from any concern for human suffering and liberation and any collective political action to deal with such problems. The cynicism and the fascination with popular fashion that characterize cultural studies, says Eagleton, offer proof that postmodernism has become prey to the consumer culture it originally sought to critique.

A final and perhaps most damning of all political critiques of postmodern thought is the danger of its disdain for objective truth. Postmodern thinkers imply that the idealistic values we label as reason, democracy, justice, morality, progress, and human rights are not eternal truths but simply labels with accompanying narratives used by people to protect their power and privilege. "Truth," itself, in fact, is nothing but a social construct and another expression of the will to power; the program that seizes the definition of truth will have the dominant narrative and the dominant position.

Originally, this viewpoint seemed to offer a potent critical jackhammer to those seeking to deconstruct the fancy edifices of dominant or privileged social groups. However, postmodern intellectual skepticism has led to a dangerous cynicism about all values with potentially disastrous real-world results. If any claim to truth can be deconstructed, won't the people with power always be able to win the day with their version of the truth? After all, they hold most of the levers of power—the public offices to protect, the media venues to communicate, the money to advertise, the lobbyists to schmooze, the talk radio shows to whip up sentiment, the public relations apparatus to spin the story their direction. In other words, if all debate about moral or ethical values can be reduced to claims of competing power groups, won't the already-powerful usually win the debate? One tool of the powerless and oppressed has always been a moral appeal to justice and fairness, but this tool has been devalued by postmodern

philosophy, according to this critique. Or maybe more accurately, it has been picked up quickly by the powerful.

We can see this displayed in the attempts by politically powerful interests in the United States to “seize the narrative” or “frame the debate” for their own ends and purposes. And the shocking fascination with fascism of some postmodern thinkers and their progenitors, from Nietzsche to Martin Heidegger to Paul de Man, makes this concern all the stronger. Postmodernism’s cynical unwillingness to embrace any larger truths or absolutes, say its critics, make it no friend of truth or justice. Thus, we occasionally hear that the postmodern period is also a postheroic period.

A fascinating brouhaha in which all these indictments of postmodernism came together centered around the infamous prank of the physicist Alan Sokal, who notoriously submitted an article to the postmodern cultural studies journal *Social Text* in 1996. The article, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” was Sokal’s attempt to parody what he called the “fashionable nonsense” of postmodern jargon and ideas.

Sokal has described his own article as crammed full of meaningless references to obscure ideas in mathematics and physics, from which it leapt, in one breathtaking non sequitur after another, to radical conclusions about politics and society. Basically, he used a series of unrelated and untested notions about quantum gravity, laced with quotes from pomo hotshots and copious footnotes, to make the case that physical reality is actually a mere social and linguistic construct. In other words, there is no objective world verifiable by any facts—a seemingly startling conclusion from a physicist, whom we would expect to base his findings on actual evidence from the real world. Sokal purposely wrote this meaningless baloney and stuffed it in the skin of postmodern argot. The controversy erupted when Sokal revealed his deception—but only after his article had been accepted and published in this academic journal as a legitimate expression of postmodern thinking.

Sokal defended his serious prank:

*But why did I do it? I confess that I’m an unabashed Old Leftist who never quite understood how deconstruction was supposed to help the working class. And I’m a stodgy old scientist who believes, naively, that there exists an external world, that there exist objective truths about that world, and that my job is to discover some of them . . .*

*Social Text’s acceptance of my article exemplifies the intellectual arrogance of Theory—meaning postmodernist literary theory—carried to its logical extreme . . . If all is discourse and “text,” then knowledge of the real world is superfluous . . . If, moreover, all is rhetoric and “language games,” then internal logical consistency is superfluous too: a patina of theoretical sophistication serves equally well. Incomprehensibility becomes a virtue; allusions, metaphors and puns substitute for evidence and logic . . . Theorizing about “the social construction of reality” won’t*

*help us find an effective treatment for AIDS or devise strategies for preventing global warming. Nor can we combat false ideas in history, sociology, economics and politics if we reject the notions of truth and falsity. (1996, 338)*

Sokal and others thus indict an approach that began in revolution but has now become, in their opinion, itself a self-satisfied obstruction to social change.

In all these ways, different critics have hovered around the corpus of postmodernism, picking at its bones.

## **An Issue to Consider: Deconstruction Theory**

*Deconstruction is often talked about as though it were primarily a critical method, but it is best understood as a way of resisting the authority of someone or something that has power over you.*

—Stephen Bonnycastle

*Deconstruction glorifies the critic, humiliates the author, and makes the reader wonder why he bothered.*

—Mason Cooley

*Deconstruction* may be the most amiable offspring of postmodernism—or at least one of the most approachable for teachers and students.

The surprisingly lively child of the dour progenitors of structuralism and the following generation of poststructural thinkers, deconstruction can most fruitfully be traced in the work of philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Probably the most prominent of the generation of French scholars who proved so influential on Western thinking beginning in the 1960s, Derrida taught at the Sorbonne and at several American universities, most notably Yale, where he was associated with a group of well-known literary theorists, including Harold Bloom and Paul de Man. Born in Algeria of Jewish parents, Derrida seems one of those figures whose boundary-straddling life (spanning North Africa and Europe and North America, desert and sea, colonizer and colonized, Judaism and Christianity and Islam, academia and popular culture) encouraged outside-the-boundaries thinking.

Derrida was an interesting character. For example, he was one of those thinkers who felt knowledge about an author was a distraction from the writing on the page, which he famously expressed in his declamation, “There is nothing outside the text.” Consistent with this deemphasis on the author, for almost twenty years Derrida wouldn’t allow himself to be photographed for publication. And he made it difficult for anyone to find out even any basic biographical information, giving him a certain mystery and glamour.

When he emerged from this seclusion, however, he was treated like an intellectual rock star. In 2002, he consented to be the subject of a widely circulated documentary film—titled *Derrida*, of course—made by one of his former students, which is a rambling yet interesting introduction to his ideas. In this film and his writings and interviews, Derrida comes across as a merry prankster and wit. In the documentary, as he’s wandering through his library, a filmmaker asks him whether he’s read all the books therein. “No,” Derrida replies with a twinkle in his eye, “only four of them. But I read those very, very carefully.” One Derrida sentence in his book *Dissemination* (1981) runs to five pages. In *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles* (1979), Derrida goes on a seventeen-page discourse about five words (“I have forgotten my umbrella”) that he found written in the margin of one of Nietzsche’s unpublished manuscripts. In *Glas* (1974), he runs two and sometimes three sets of commentaries in parallel columns on the book’s pages, messing with the usual way we read philosophy. He was a playful, waggish writer. He substituted a belief in absolute truth with a belief in infinite play.

With wide-ranging interests, Derrida’s ideas about all kinds of things attracted passionate adherents and vehement critics. Though a common gripe is that trying to read Derrida’s prose is like trying to hack through colorful but almost impenetrably dense shrubbery, his ideas have nonetheless become solidly planted in our contemporary intellectual landscape. His notion of deconstruction in particular has affected thinking about language and literature and has disseminated into fields as diverse as architecture, film, ethics, political theory, philosophy, and law.

Though deconstruction is a complex cluster of ideas that Derrida was coy about making too clear, it is basically a form of critical analysis, a method of inquiry that can be fruitfully applied to literature and to many other human endeavors. Actually, though, calling it a “method” may be overreaching. Derrida himself rejected the definition of deconstruction as a systematic critical practice. So maybe it’s more accurate to call deconstruction a habit of skepticism, a willingness to pick away at the careful packaging of certainty that neatly covers most cultural acts. Deconstruction aims to tear that colorful wrapping off, to disturb or *destabilize* old definitions and ways of thinking. In this way, it’s not too far from the original meaning of *analysis*, which in its etymology denotes *breaking up, loosening, undoing*.

Derrida reiterated many of the big ideas of postmodernism in his own inimitable way. Though he didn’t reject reason—the main tool in the kit of Western philosophy—as a general tool of inquiry, he rejected what he called the *logocentric* assertion that reason, logic, and clear language can enlighten us with timeless certainty about absolute truths. For Derrida, a search for any ultimate theory to describe the universal condition is a dead-end quest. And the key to this futility lies in the limits of language.

As with de Saussure and the structuralists, Derrida believed that meaning is not inherent in words or ideas but in their relationships and histories within an arbitrary system of shared but fluid conventions—and thus all writing is full of innate confusions and contradictions. Then Derrida stirred in a bit of poststructuralist thinking, most notably

the spicy notion that systems of shared conventions implicate any observers of them. Thus, the ideal of philosophic or scientific detachment is a myth and objectivity is a con game; the observer is *always* part of the text—that is, never standing outside it, always immersed in the shared conventions and cultural assumptions of any utterance. Thus, meaning or truth is not eternal but is relational and contextual, understood only within a specific network of influences and differences. Knowledge, rather than a domain of pure, universal forms as Plato envisioned, is better understood as a changing set of cultural, historical, and linguistic constructs. As such, knowledge will change as times, conditions, and contexts change, and as we change. Meaning is not singular but multiple, truth not stable but malleable, identity not fixed but infinite, inquiry not conclusive but provisional. Texts are elusive, never absolute in their truth or permanence, and thus our understanding of any text must always be tentative. No text is closed to alternative interpretation. In all this, Derrida borrows from the syllabus for Postmodernism 101.

Derrida offers *deconstruction* as a postmodern reading strategy that resists the teacher or critic who tries to opine with grandiose certainty that “*this* is what a text means.” Derrida would cluck his tongue at such a silly, conclusive claim, asserting that all texts are “haunted by a radical undecidability,” their meanings never fixed and final. Meaning is always “deferred,” he said, always set in the future. With the same puckish attitude as the small bento joint in my neighborhood that has a “Free Food Tomorrow” sign over the front door as a daily joke, Derrida asserts that meaning must always be considered endlessly free and open into the future. Texts never reach closure. Thus, we are always limiting their possibilities by our provisional interpretations—misreading them, in effect, by applying our limits to them. Any other claim is arrogant. After all, the company of people who insist that their ideologies reflect absolute truth includes dictators; insisting that one has “the answer” is totalitarian—or *totalizing* in pomo lingo.

Another premise of deconstruction is that all texts contain multiple layers of meaning that have been laminated onto them over time by personal as well as cultural and historical processes, though those domains are often difficult to peel apart. Authors often have unresolved conflicts and contradictory emotions, and their literary works may reveal these underlying anxieties and perplexities. In addition, there are veneers of cultural and historical assumption in every text. Many of these layers may not even be perceived by the author, a phenomenon perhaps best expressed by the old aphorism that we don’t know who discovered water, but we’re pretty certain it wasn’t a fish.

Even authors are oblivious to the limited cultural and historical waters in which they swim; as with all of us, they will confuse their little fishbowl for the whole ocean. Even when we fancy ourselves as independent, circling around the outside edge of the main schools, we’re still inside the bowl. Thus, given these complex, concealed personal and cultural agendas, every text is packed with contradictions. These may offer a rich lode for interpretation, a sense of dynamic tension deeper than the surface meaning, so our job is to dig deeper—or, as it is sometimes expressed, to *penetrate the disguises* of a text.



There's a distinct political dimension to these ideas. Paying close analytic attention to language—particularly as displayed in Derrida's enthusiasm for reading the silences, evasions, and conflicts of texts—has offered productive ways of studying the language of politics and the politics of language.

If texts are socially constructed from the accepted *signifying practices* and *discourses of power* of their historical time and place, authors will reflect in their works these prevailing assumptions, even if they believe they are independent thinkers. Texts thus always present dominating ideologies, and in their silences they squelch or distort other claims. For example, multicultural scholars point out that the canon of Western literature has marginalized non-Europeans. Any act of choosing or reading texts cannot be divorced from issues of power and authority.

Thus, say deconstructionists, silences and distortions in texts and canons reveal intentions often unrecognized by authors. Similar to the way that Freud regarded slips of the tongue as meaningful and readable, Derrida saw significance in slips of the text—the omissions, discontinuities, contradictions, and ambiguities in every reading. Subterranean meanings are exposed by both what is in the text and what isn't in it, what is spoken and what remains unspoken. Most texts thus have claims that are undone at the same time as they are made—as in the example of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be discussed momentarily. A writer's metaphors invariably subvert the writer's arguments. Even the act of writing itself, seemingly an expression of the hope of being able to express something, also carries the embedded expression of despair at the ultimate inexpressibility of anything; every assertion implies a negation. Invariably, every text can be reduced to sets of incompatible propositions.

So, this is an interesting development. Because of the instability of language, the *undecidability* of meaning, and the ideologies consciously or unconsciously embedded, every text ultimately fractures in self-contradiction. And those fractures reflect the deep flaws in the framework of Western culture, the contradictions and incoherencies of Western thought.

In the light of all these complicated, contradictory structures implicit in every text, deconstruction is a crowbar. Its work is to pry up the surfaces and expose the wiring, the hidden beams, the construction methods and materials, the fractures and flaws. The aware reader in deconstruction mode is on the lookout for omissions, displacements, differences, misspeakings, and examples of bad faith.

Derrida employed his crowbar against both ancient and new structures of language and thought. In one essay, he could deconstruct Plato's use of the old Greek word *pharmakon*, which could mean either "remedy" or "poison." Derrida analyzed varying uses and translations of *pharmakon*—from which springs *pharmacy* and many related words—including the fact that this ambiguous word goes back etymologically to a similar word for *outcast*, which serves up a new dimension of thinking about how we regard the sick among us. Or we might consider a modern practice such as cancer chemotherapy,

in which the treatment is both toxic and healing. This linguistic paradox is the kind of insight deconstruction offers.

A more contemporary demonstration of deconstruction can be found in a series of conversations Derrida engaged in shortly after the attacks of 9-11. In these, Derrida tried to pull apart the language of the “war on terror.” Though the political response and discourse seemed to many Americans a set of self-evident propositions, Derrida deconstructed such assumptions. He asked: How do we define and distinguish legitimate “war” from illegitimate “terror”? Do we call the same activity a different word depending on whether it’s waged by a powerful, organized entity as opposed to a less-powerful, less-organized entity? Why? Can there be state terrorism? What if a state helped recruit, train, and arm what turns out to be a guerrilla or underground insurgency? Can a war be declared on something other than a political entity or sovereign nation? If so, absent any formal surrender process, how do we know this war has been won? Was the American Revolution, waged in its early stages by guerillas using unconventional strategies and representing what Britain didn’t recognize as a legitimate nation, largely a war of terror? Who gets to assign labels—“freedom fighters” as opposed to “terrorists,” for example—anyway? Is the real war one of control of words, images, and discourses? (Borradori 2003).

These are all thought-provoking questions. Deconstruction encourages in this way the *interrogation* of the language of any text, from modern to ancient. Though Derrida was criticized for being evasive about answering questions about his ideas, he was a genius at asking questions.

To sum up, then, deconstruction is the act, through close and careful reading, of starting to peel away layers to expose a text’s unspoken meanings as well as its underlying props and supports, particularly those that have been hidden behind the wall of certainty. Deconstruction is a demonstration of the instability of texts—of all cultural acts, in other words. If every text has multiple meanings, every text must admit to multiple, limitless alternative interpretations, many of which are contradictory. Deconstruction seeks to show that a preference for any interpretation is always based on the reader and the context rather than the words on the page. Deconstructive reading isn’t an attempt to dig up some mythic treasure chest of true meaning hidden in a text but to explore the range of meanings created for the text by particular groups of readers.

However, deconstruction is not just an act of anarchy or nihilism, of ultimately asserting that everything finally means nothing. The widely read Derrida revered the literature he deconstructed, excited by the fact that his favorite writers from Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, and Franz Kafka revealed so much beyond what they straightforwardly asserted. Attempts to establish conclusive meanings, he said, actually diminished meaning by repressing the limitless vitality of language. So the message of Derrida was not that everything is meaningless but that everything is infinitely reinterpretable—and that we should have as much fun with this as a child digging deeper into a sandbox for the pure joy of exploration.

When Derrida’s ideas washed up on the shores of the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they found in those politically charged, challenge-everything

years perhaps their most enthusiastic reception in English and literature departments of American universities.

Derrida offered a philosophical framework not just for analyzing contemporary language use and misuse but also for revisiting and often radically reinterpreting classic works of literature and philosophy, revealing the hidden prejudices and contradictions of the icons of Western culture, unearthing old assumptions and cultural biases as well as new meanings, and questioning the traditional canon of great literature with attendant proposals to include previously unheard voices in the literary curriculum. Plus his prose was, though dense, often funny and rich with puns, wordplay, and slyness. Deconstruction breathed new life into literary criticism. Its popularity in English departments is perhaps why deconstruction has been called “literature’s revenge on philosophy.”

On the face of it, deconstruction would seem to have some potential positive attitudes to impart to a classroom. The habit of paying close, rigorous attention to texts is certainly one we’re trying to impart to our students. So is the idea that all texts are endlessly open to interpretation and reinterpretation. And so are the ideas that we can multiply the number of legitimate interpretations of a text as well as uncover multiple layers of meaning at work in a text.

The attitude of skepticism can be an antidote to *CliffsNotes* or *SparkNotes* or the claims of certainty of any teachers or “experts” about what the themes and meanings of a given work must be, and deconstruction combines its antiauthoritarian attitude with useful interpretive tools. Deconstruction also invites students to exercise their new critical facilities in the wider world, interrogating the texts of political claims, TV ads, images of beauty, or any cultural rhetoric. The insight that a text ultimately means whatever the current power structure—whether teacher, tradition, or critical establishment—says it does gives a reader permission to read a different way. And, frankly, tearing apart bland, assured ideas can be invigorating. However, deconstruction attracts critiques as thickly as magnets draw iron filings.

Acts of literary deconstruction often start by defining *binary oppositions* found in a text. Binary oppositions, a favorite concept of structural linguistics, are considered the building blocks of meaning, offering an organizing pattern for a text as well as for a philosophy, a culture or a discourse. This viewpoint asserts that humans conceive of their experience in terms of oppositions; we understand *masculinity* by comparing it with *femininity*, for example.

In most cases, however, according to this viewpoint, texts will consciously or unconsciously favor—or *privilege*—one term in the pairing. Thus, these constructs are not balanced, egalitarian poles of experience but actually a hierarchy we carry in our heads. For example, we may have a fundamental set of ideas engrained in our head from our upbringing and our surrounding culture about the opposition of *white* and *black*. A whole series of binary constructs can be found in Western culture that build on and parallel this *white/black* dichotomy: *day/night*, *safety/danger*, *enlightenment/mystery*, *purity/corruption*, *cleanliness/dirtiness*, *civilization/savagery*, *good/evil*. (The good guys in old cowboy movies always wear white hats and the bad guys wear black ones, right?)

In this instance, the first term in each opposition is usually favored, linguistically and culturally. Thus, we end up privileging whiteness over blackness in countless conscious and unconscious ways—to the detriment of people of color. Taking note of what is favored will give us a picture of the text's ideology or controlling system of beliefs.

However, there's another factor in operation here. Ideologies tend to draw rigid *with us/against us* lines around their ideas, ignoring any inconvenient or complicating details, oversimplifying and avoiding all shades of gray in life. So if we look closely, we can see slippages—places where the two terms overlap or secretly interact, even as they desperately try to hold themselves in place. Finding these slippages is just another way of seeing where texts contradict themselves and undermine their own supposed authority, destabilizing our comfortable assumptions. Thus does deconstruction expose the contradictions inherent in any text.

Yet this insight may not be that useful for literary analysis, because one of the characteristics of literature is its commitment to representing human slippage, contradiction, ambiguity, and paradox. Doesn't literature resist as forcefully as deconstruction the squeezing of all issues into *either/or* simplifications?

For example, let's try to deconstruct the oppositions of *whiteness* and *blackness* in Joseph Conrad's controversial old chestnut *Heart of Darkness*. At first we cannot help but feel Conrad's elevation of whiteness is his repugnant true ideology. We recoil from his portrayal of Africa, the "Dark Continent" of his day, as a place of horror, and we condemn the pernicious effects of the way whiteness is privileged. Conrad's European pilgrims in Africa are all dressed in white linen and are "emissaries of light," and his Eurocentric racial bias seems obvious and repugnant to our modern sensibilities. But as we read further, we see all the ways Conrad actually continually complicates this easy analysis. Brussels, the home of the colonial enterprise for which Conrad's protagonist works, is described as a "whited sepulcher," a vast tomb, and all the white-clad colonists turn out to be murderous, hollow exemplifications of evil. Conrad just won't let any easy dichotomization of life stand unchallenged, and by the end of the novel we're questioning who represents lightness and who represents darkness, who is civilized and who is savage.

A further deconstructive reading might point out that though Conrad's text thus seems to slant toward greater human understanding in terms of a *bigotry/tolerance* opposition, it actually reveals a deeper racism by never naming the black characters or letting them speak anything other than gibberish. But most of the white characters remain unnamed, too, and many speak equally empty words, just more of them. The wrenching tension at the root of the story may be that Marlow himself (and the text itself) is in fact both racist *and* against racism and unable to reconcile those two oppositions. Repeatedly, the text confronts us with binary questions we can't easily answer in only one way. Is Marlow's act of refusing to tell Kurtz's fiancée that her deceased hero was actually a monster an act of kindness or an act of complicity in the evil doing? Well, maybe both. When in his dying breath he says, "The horror! The horror!" is Kurtz regretting his horrible misdeeds or crushingly disappointed by the fact he hasn't been able to accomplish more

of his murderous goals? Well, maybe both. The novella's revelation of human slippages seems less like a problem of the text than a problem of the human heart that the text recognizes. If literature is already committed to deconstructing our simplistic binary oppositions, why does it need further deconstruction?

One of the most famous literary openings in all of literature, in fact, asserts that life is not a matter of simple binary either/or equations but is far more complicated. Charles Dickens begins his *Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way" (1990, 1). In this canonical passage, Dickens actually pokes fun at the easy assumptions of binary oppositions. Literature doesn't so easily fit into a series of oppositions, and trying to deconstruct its binary terms is simply redundant. In other words, one of the main moves of deconstruction has as much relevance to literature as a cross-dribble basketball move has on a football field.

Deconstruction requires a construction to work against. We have to assume a text has a coherent, consistent theme before we can expose its incoherence and inconsistency—or *self-difference*, in pomo-speak. To place a text into uncertainty, it first has to show certainty. Thus, practitioners of deconstruction advise starting the process by identifying the unity that appears to be present in a text. However, literature often presents life's variety rather than its unity. A few years ago, a local theater company here where I live in Portland, Oregon, had a poster that spotlighted the company director's quote to the effect that every effective stage play, at its heart, asks a profound question. If indeed a main characteristic of all forms of literature is to ask questions and reveal their complexity, the only reader seeking a singular answer—a *unity*—is a narrow-minded one or perhaps someone who needs to artificially define a construct so there's something to deconstruct.

There are other criticisms of deconstruction. One is that it is actually just a tortuously complicated expression of what is really not that profound an idea: great texts are complex and have multiple meanings. "Oh, duh," said one of my students once as I tried to explain this nub of deconstruction.

Then there's all the ponderous and alienating language.

Another beef with deconstruction is with its cultural studies offshoot and the fascination with social phenomena, no matter how obscure or trivial. According to this complaint, the fascination with cultural trivia is a poor substitute for addressing literature's courageous willingness to address life's important issues—love, death, justice, God. An article I read a few years ago in the satirical publication *The Onion* may have best expressed this critique: "Grad Student Deconstructs Take-Out Menu at the Burrito Bandit."

Another fuss about deconstruction is that it's developmentally inappropriate for our students who are so busily engaged in constructing their identities—and who just might

find in literature a great guide to help in that maturation process. According to this argument, young readers are looking for ideals to believe in, causes to join, texts to love. Yet all deconstruction offers is the message that ideals, causes, and texts are all contestable and ultimately indecipherable. If such skepticism and distrust is the dominant response we cultivate in our students, what can result but permanent cynicism? We should be supporting students in their desire to positively reconstruct their world rather than negatively deconstruct it.

Perhaps the most damning criticism of deconstruction is that it leads nowhere. Or that it leads, at best, to exactly the same conclusion about any story or poem or novel—that it's contradictory and incoherent and ultimately *undecidable*. Traditional methods of literary interpretation usually seek to find coherences and connections. Deconstruction, in its assertion of the self-subverting nature of language, denies coherence and connection. If all texts unravel in self-contradiction and incoherence, why should we care about or trust any of them? If texts can mean anything, doesn't that mean they ultimately mean nothing? If meaning is always ultimately indeterminable, why read? The deconstructive mantra is that every text is an abyss of limitless and contradictory meanings. Who wants to leap into such an abyss? It always ends with the same painful thump. And once we've deconstructed everything, what happens next?

Regardless of all these concerns, the practice of deconstruction has been influential in our culture, our students are likely to bump into it in college, and it does offer some possible activities for reading literature in the high school classroom.

## Teaching Suggestions and Considerations

*Imagining all the things a text might be saying, including even the opposite of what it may appear to say, will help us to become more creative and careful readers and writers.*

—Steven Lynn

*Deconstruction does not try to resolve the thematic tensions in literary texts into some stable, unified interpretation but rather tries to sustain those tensions in order to learn from them . . . This is a vision of art as a seething cauldron of meanings in flux. As a dynamic entity tied to both the culture that produced it and the culture that interprets it, art becomes a vehicle for understanding our culture, our history, our language, and ourselves.*

—Lois Tyson

The previous discussions have alluded to a number of the general teaching implications of postmodernism.

As noted, the whole postmodern project is supportive of a lively, discussion-centered, democratic, knowledge-negotiating English classroom.

The postmodern belief in the instability of language invites us to consider every

literary text as endlessly open to interpretation; from this viewpoint, searching for meaning is never a closed issue.

The postmodern skepticism about totalizing narratives leaves us open to multiple critical approaches, multiple interpretations, and multiple voices.

The postmodern interrogation of power leads us to constantly challenge the traditional literary canon as we choose books for our classroom and school—and to invite our students into that endeavor. (For more on this, check out Chapter 11, “Political or Advocacy Criticism.”)

But these are mostly matters of teaching attitudes. The harder issue is how we might introduce some of these tricky ideas to our students. It’s possible, with a couple of preliminary cautions.

First, approach postmodernism with a light touch, in the spirit of Derrida’s disposition that literature constitutes a great intellectual playground for ceaseless messing around. Without a sense of play and fun, the study of postmodernism can go quickly grim.

Second, beware of the easy-to-reach adolescent conclusion that the only possible end-product of postmodernism’s suspicions about the stability of language and truth is the conclusion that nothing matters. Our goal is to cultivate a healthy postmodern skepticism, not an unhealthy postmodern cynicism. The former opens the mind, the latter closes it.

With these cautions in mind, what can we do to introduce postmodern ideas to our classroom?

To begin with, we can have students read about these ideas and hash them over in classroom discussion.

Next, we can have our students read works that display modernist or postmodern moves (as noted in the earlier sidebars) and identify those moves.

Finally, warmed up by these preliminary activities, we can have students whack at some texts using the main tool of postmodernism, the crowbar of deconstruction, remembering that the goal of prying under the polished floorboards and lovely painted walls of the literary text is not just to dismantle and destroy but to diagnose the operational assumptions, systematic flaws, and contradictory structures therein.

## Doing Deconstruction

Okay, that previous paragraph is thick with pungent pomo jargon, but how can we accomplish deconstruction with students in our classrooms?

I will suggest a set of beginning steps for introducing this reading approach, and I’ll use Harper Lee’s beloved and widely read Pulitzer Prize–winning 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an example. This text has become part of the U.S. literary canon; since its publication, tens of millions of copies have been sold, the book has never been out of print, and it has become a staple of the American curriculum, listed for decades as

one of the top ten most frequently read secondary texts. Though in my city it has been less commonly assigned in schools with large numbers of African American students (perhaps for reasons to be enumerated next), we can safely assume that many students in their high school careers will have encountered the story of the young Scout Finch. The novel's canonical status makes it ripe for deconstructive plucking. Here's a process:

1. Find the ideology that a text seems to promote.

The first step is to identify the primary unifying idea that appears to be present in a text (even if, as noted, some readers think this is a reductive task). In other words, students can attempt to describe what seems to be the most readily apparent interpretation or theme coming across—what many might consider the “obvious” meaning. (Note that we're not considering the author's intention, we're only focusing on what we find in the text.)

This determination can begin with questions in a Learning Log entry or to begin a class discussion: What do you perceive as the most obvious unifying theme in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? If we had to identify one big idea, the most important idea in this novel, what would it seem to be on first reflection?

In spring 2009, I visited the classrooms of my friends Lisa Mitchell and Jason Parris, and here were some of the varied answers their seniors gave to this initial question: “Racial prejudice is bad.” “You should stand up for what's right.” “Don't judge people by what you don't know about them.” “Ignorance is the ultimate weakness.” “Stereotyping is evil.” “Sometimes the hardest thing to do and the right thing to do are the same thing.”

The students ultimately settled on what they saw as the primary interpretation: the message that we must have the courage to stand up, as Atticus Finch does, to prejudice against those who are different—from the unknowable Boo Radleys of the world to those of a different race. Or, as Atticus Finch says, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” (Lee 1960, 30).

2. Identify how this apparent unified ideology falls apart under deconstructive pressure.

After identifying what seems to be the primary idea or ideas in a text, we can help our students start to unravel them with questions such as these: Now, in what ways does the text work against itself? Do you see the apparent ideology breaking down anywhere in the text? Are there any contradictions, subsurface ironies or unresolved tensions built into the text that undercut the main idea? Can we read this text in another way? What's at stake in the differences between interpretations?

Here's a comment from one of the students in response: “If you're supposed to walk around in someone else's skin, how come we never get to really know anything about the black people in the story?”



That student raises an uncomfortable question. Many teachers value *To Kill a Mockingbird* not only because it is popular and approachable but also because it exposes and criticizes prejudice, primarily in its most pernicious form of racism. If we apply a deconstructive skepticism to the work, however, a case can be made that the novel also unconsciously expresses racism, or is *implicated* in it. Though the novel clearly shows the murderous blindness of racial prejudice in Lee's fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, in the 1930s, some critics have noted that the falsely accused character of Tom Robinson reprises the racial stereotype of a slow, passive Southern black man dependent on a white hero to save him. No black characters are presented with the depth of the main white characters or given any chance for intelligent action other than standing and applauding the white hero, so readers find it easier to identify with the white hero than the unknowable black victim. And the melodramatic plot makes it easy for readers to detach themselves from the racial conflict, point their fingers at the evil bad guy Bob Ewell, and avoid examining their own participation in racial stereotyping and marginalizing. Thus, the text that condemns racism also participates in it.

I shared some of my thoughts in this vein in that class where the student questioned Harper Lee's novel. After hearing my remark, one student said, "Yeah, I never thought of that." Another said, "That's ridiculous. How could you ever interpret a book that teaches millions of kids that racism is bad to mean it's good? I don't like this destruction stuff."

"Uh, *deconstruction*," I said.

"Same thing," he said.

Such skepticism aside, this kind of text-questioning is the essential activity of deconstruction.

But there are some other possible ways to undertake a deconstructive reading.

3. Find and *re-situate* what is *marginalized* in the text.

Another fruitful strategy for deconstructing fiction is to pay attention to what the author hasn't. What is absent from a fictional text—the perspective of certain groups, the full implication of an action, particular voices—often speaks volumes about the biases and instabilities therein. (Sometimes deconstructionists refer to this as *the presence of absence*.) To examine these silences in a text, students can take a marginalized, denigrated, or excluded character, plotline, or symbol and re-situate that aspect of the narrative at the center of it.

In a related vein, some postmoderns also talk about the way texts can impose a *reading position* on readers. In other words, from the countless interpretive choices open to readers, the text can in subtle or unsubtle ways try to direct the reader's interpretation in one particular direction. To examine these manipulations by a text, students can identify the particular reading position offered by the text and sit in a different seat.

As noted earlier, sometimes postmodern writers themselves have undertaken these kinds of re-envisionings of older texts, from Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (with its replacement onto the front stage of *Jane Eyre*'s locked-in-the-prop-room Bertha Rochester) to Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (with those two minor characters from *Hamlet* presented as its comic protagonists). American author Alice Randall caused a brouhaha with her best-selling 2000 novel *The Wind Done Gone*, which retells the story of Scarlett O'Hara of *Gone with the Wind* from the point of view of Scarlett's half-sister, a mulatto slave at Tara, offering a completely different perspective in completely different language on this popular tale.

In terms of the silences in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we can have a lively discussion in class about how Calpurnia or Tom or any of the African American characters might have seen the events Scout describes. If they were at the center of the story instead of victims, what might change?

And what about the pivotal character Mayella Ewell? Students might do a journal entry or conduct a discussion wherein Mayella tells her story.

And what about the more-evil-than-evil Bob Ewell, the novel's villain and the town's drunk? Would we have the courage to look beyond his flaws to find the causes of his virulent violence and racism? Are there subterranean social class issues in this novel, with the Finch family occupying a higher social position than Ewell and the other "rednecks" of Maycomb?

In terms of the reading position offered by *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we can examine the story's telling voice. Harper Lee's strategy was fairly straightforward. She had her story narrated in first person by the lively, engaging Scout Finch. Readers are encouraged to take her position on the events that unfold in Maycomb, because she is the point-of-view character and because she is such a spunky, appealing person. The text prods us to learn what Scout learns.

But what if the story had been told by Jem? He is much more disillusioned than his little sister and might not give us the same hopeful reading. What other character's perspective might offer a whole different reading position on the novel?

Think of all the possibilities of employing these kinds of activities on other texts.

At the conclusion of *Huck Finn*, what might Jim have to say about all that transpired? And what about Aunt Sally, who Huck casts as the personification of unhealthy domestication? What might she have to say about Huck's adventures?

At the conclusion of *Hamlet*, when the shenanigans of the Danish royal family have led to a takeover of Denmark by Fortinbras, the Norwegian prince, what might the citizens have to say about how their kingdom's autonomy has been squandered by their dithering prince? They don't get any voice whatsoever in the play.

Every text has silences and positions. One way for students to deconstruct these is to find in literary works other reading positions or identify marginalized characters and liberate them to speak for a moment in their own voices.

4. Reverse those binary oppositions.

Postmodern critics and deconstruction warriors like to start with the old structuralist idea that the pulse beating at the heart of most texts can best be located by identifying its underlying *binary oppositions*.

Though I've not had huge success in classrooms working with this concept of binary oppositions, I'll share what I've tried.

Our first question: Can we define a set of central oppositions embedded in a text's themes? Can we see which term is favored, revealing the text's ideology? Can we then overturn or complicate what we have discovered, revealing the text's ultimate undecidability?

Let's try it with *Mockingbird*. What might be a central binary opposition in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for instance? A good/evil opposition might be fruitful because the text clearly sets up Atticus Finch as a good, heroic man standing up against the forces of evil racial bigotry.

Once we start to examine that polarity, however, we see the issue is not so simple. Atticus requires his children to be civil to the abusive, racist Mrs. Dubose, for example, who we and the children learn later is a morphine addict courageously trying to kick her addiction before she dies. So even bigots can have praiseworthy behavior. And the reclusive Boo Radley commits a murder, but because of his precarious psychological state and the fact that his victim has himself been trying to kill the Finch children, we are positioned to see this as an act of goodness. The sheriff ignores the law and is willing to lie about Bob Ewell's death to preserve the status quo. Harper Lee shows how complicated goodness can be to discern.

Other oppositions in the text have been suggested by students: male/female (based on Scout's dislike of dresses and the way she finds the accusation that she "acts like a girl" offensive), courage/cowardice, innocence/experience, and so forth, but none of those seemed easily or fruitfully overturnable.

Another canonical text that might pose opportunities for this sort of deconstruction is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. One binary opposition we might identify at the heart of this novel is the tension between innocence and decadence. Nick Carraway, the youthful and optimistic Midwestern narrator, serves as our guide to the wretched excess of wealthy Long Island Sound socialites. He becomes an acolyte of the self-made Jay Gatsby and ultimately condemns Gatsby's circle of friends for their carelessness with other human lives. But as much as we sense the text's judgment of the decadence side of the opposition, we can also deconstruct this apparent favoring by noting that

Carraway's innocence is not so innocent. He sticks loyally by Gatsby even when he learns that his hero's life is a hollow edifice of lies and his fortune has been criminally earned. He's always the last person at every shallow party he disdains. He is as attracted to decadence as much as he is repelled by it. The thoughtless East Eggers are the most attractive people in the novel, while their decent working-class victim George Wilson is presented as a slow, mulish man. What the text condemns, it romances, simultaneously hating and loving—as did its author, F. Scott Fitzgerald—the dissipations of the Jazz Age. Thus, its meaning is forever open to reinterpretation.

5. Define text more broadly and use English class for a wide range of cultural studies.

Deconstruction encourages us to think outside the borders of literature. The recasting of a *text* as any cultural product invites us to consider analyzing with our students many kinds of discourse.

In terms of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students can find many opportunities for fruitful cultural study after reading the novel. One direction might be to examine the ongoing critical reception of this popular novel. Though (or maybe because) it is a standard in the high school literary canon, the novel has suffered decades of censorship attempts from various quarters. Some have lambasted the novel for its profanity, racial slurs, and use of rape as a plot device. Others have blasted it for not condemning racism more strongly. Students might analyze and deconstruct these arguments.

Or, they might examine the 1962 movie based on the novel, which earned Gregory Peck the Oscar for Best Actor as well as the award for Best Adapted Screenplay. The American Film Institute deemed Peck's Atticus Finch character the "greatest movie hero of the twentieth century." Students can analyze the film for its deviations and omissions from Harper Lee's novel as well as deconstructing Finch's heroism.

Or they might want to look at the whole cultural context of the novel, including Southern racial politics in the 1930s when the book is set and in the 1960s when the book was written. And they can assess the silences in the novel as discussed previously.

The idea of cultural studies invites us to think past the covers of any particular book. English class can be reenvisioned as a place for the scrutiny of all kinds of discourses—fashion, film, news, design, technology, celebrity, and much more. In her terrific volume *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, for example, Linda Christensen offers many rich activities she has shared with her English classes. Her students mix their studies of literature with analyses of children's TV cartoons and animated films for racial and gender stereotypes, deconstructions of children's literature, examinations of multiple dialects of English, and arguments over what

constitutes “standard English.” Using the broadest concept of text, students can range through all the high-interest, high-impact artifacts of contemporary culture to practice their critical reading and writing skills.

In all these ways might we bring postmodern and deconstructive ideas, attitudes, and techniques into our classrooms.

## To Sum Up

Although the high tide of postmodern influence may have passed, we are still influenced by its backwash. Even as it ebbs, much is left behind on our intellectual coastline.

Postmodern thinking has become part of our literary world. Its ideas have captured the imaginations of a couple of generations of scholars. The habits encouraged by postmodernism—particularly those three big ideas: (1) a sense of language’s instability and flexibility, (2) a skepticism about grandiose “this and only this is what a text means” pronouncements, and (3) a critical attitude about the political and power-seeking dimensions of discourse—all can add to a reader’s skills.

As my student said during the discussion that led me to consider sharing this difficult, thorny field in my high school classroom, postmodernism may indeed be a “messing with our ideas of what we think we know.” This process can be, well, messy, yet as when chefs experiment with new foods and combinations in the kitchen, something quite new and tasty might get stirred up as well.

# Postmodern Criticism for Students: Navigating Theory

By Tim Gillespie

*Everything we do in life is rooted in theory.*

—bell hooks

*Theory is all grey and the golden tree of life is green.*

—J. W. von Goethe

## An Overview

*Postmodernism* is tricky to define. Ask a dozen thinkers to define it and you'll likely get two dozen different answers. Furthermore, there are scads of intellectual movements of the last few decades—structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and more—that are sometimes clumped under the label of postmodernism and sometimes not. Regardless of these difficulties, the cluster of ideas we call postmodern has been extraordinarily influential in literature and literary criticism in recent decades.

Postmodernism (or *pomo* as the concept is sometimes referred to in snarky shorthand on college campuses) is a label most commonly affixed to a particular bunch of ideas and attitudes that gathered around café tables in France before migrating to other European and U.S. intellectual hotspots in the second half of the twentieth century. Those ideas captured a generation of scholars, who began to use the capitalized label *Theory* to denote various strains of postmodern thinking.

In word and deed, postmodernism can be seen as a result of and a response to *modernism*, that cultural revolution in the arts that began early in the twentieth century and gave us the “modern dance” of Isadora Duncan that rebelled against old classical dance traditions, the “modern art” of Picasso that rebelled against old painting traditions, and the writing experiments of James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and W. B. Yeats. These modernists began a revolution against many of the cultural certainties of the past, and postmodernists continue that revolution. Both share skepticism about older traditions and a language of *defamiliarization*, the idea that we get so habituated to our old routines of thought that unfamiliar new vocabularies and forms of art are needed to foster fresh thinking.

However, even as the modernists sought to subvert and reinvent old traditions, they still believed in the traditional aims of art. They were seeking new artistic forms to express the new realities of their time, yet they still aspired to create great artworks that would give meaning to their age.

Postmodernists, however, do not have such lofty aspirations. They are skeptical of all the categories blithely noted in the previous paragraph, grand ideas such as “great artworks” and the notion of “giving meaning to an age.” The modernist revolution, which sought new truths, was overrun by the postmodern revolution, which questioned the very idea of seeking truth. This was truly a new development in Western thought.

Three big ideas are particularly central to postmodern Theory: the unreliability of language, the false lure of *grand narratives*, and the role of power in human interactions. Let’s look at these three analyses in turn.

## **Addressing the Centrality as Well as the Instability of Language**

Since the days of the ancient Greeks, thinkers have been wrestling with the slippery relationship between language and reality. Postmodern thought, however, plops questions of unreliable language onto center stage in the human drama. Or, as Richard Appignanesi and Chris Garratt express it, “Postmodern theory is a consequence of this century’s obsession with language. The most important 20th-century thinkers . . . shifted their focus of analysis away from *ideas* in the mind to the *language* in which thinking is expressed” (1995, 56).

In the pomo view, humans are governed by the structures and limitations of our languages rather than by any eternal truths or essential natures. The seeds for this cornerstone idea of postmodern Theory were planted in the field of linguistics. Pioneers in linguistics promoted the idea that all language is abstract and arbitrary. There’s no particular reason we call that little hunk of delicious stuff next to the crackers “cheese” other than that we’ve made a social agreement to do so.

Nonetheless, all our experience is funneled through language. As we walk down the street, our senses take in billions of bits of input—sights, sounds, smells, emotions, ideas—but we have to organize and translate all that data into meaningful and useful knowledge. The way we do this is by putting it into language. But if language is an abstract and artificial social construct, so is our experience of reality. Meaning is not inherent in the world but is a product of our systems and structures of words. Thus, our language doesn’t merely *express* or *reflect* our reality, it actually *shapes* and *determines* our reality. Or, as Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it, “The limits of our language are the limits of our world” (Richter 2004, 1).

If language is at the center of our very perceptions of the world, what does it mean that languages are in perpetual motion, developing and changing over time, subject to misunderstanding and constant reinterpretation, and different between cultures and people? If language is unstable, it means our world suddenly looks much less stable than we might like to admit.

All this applies to literary texts, which share the complexity and instability of all acts of language. (The word *text* itself, a postmodern favorite, comes from the Latin meaning *to weave*, which expresses nicely the complex, unstable strands of language, culture, history, ideology, and psychology that are woven into every piece of writing and every act of reading.)

Two significant implications have been drawn from this seemingly simple assertion that language is an unstable and untrustworthy social construct. One has to do with truth, one with power.

## Questioning Ultimate Truths

If our most basic patterns of thought are governed by arbitrary systems of language, and if those structures of language change over time and place, then the idea of *truth*—a construct of language like all ideas—has to be seen as something fluid and unstable rather than as something fixed and eternal. Yet much of human intellectual history has been involved with the quest to find ultimate truth or to discover comprehensive explanations of the universe.

Philosophers such as Hegel have sought all-inclusive philosophical systems to organize all human knowledge. Einstein and other physicists have sought a unified theory to encompass everything they know about the complex physical operations of the universe. Historians look for master explanations to tie together all the seemingly unconnected events that occur in an era. Marx tried to formulate an economic model that would describe all human social activity. Sigmund Freud tried to formulate a comprehensive model of the human psyche. And of course religions offer an overarching view of the meaning of the universe.

But postmodern thinkers have challenged these searches for what they call a *grand narrative* or a *master narrative*—that is, a story to explain all stories, a comprehensive worldview. Based on their ideas of the fluidity of language and therefore truth, postmodern theorists dismiss the effort to find such *totalizing* or *universalizing* ways of envisioning the world. These efforts do not really describe truth, they say, but simply assert an *interpretation* of truth. Truth isn't something *perceived* by the human mind but something *produced* by the human mind.

Furthermore, this isn't just an individual process. We come to our understandings of truth in a social context—in pomo lingo, our version of reality is *socially constructed*. Our perceptions and beliefs are all restricted by our language, which is bound by the limited and biased perspectives of our historic time, community, politics, gender, ethnicity, religion, race, social class, identity, nationality, age, and all the other social and cultural positions we occupy.

This postmodern skepticism about any ultimate truth is a radical departure from most Western thinking over the past two millennia, which has assumed that we live in an



inherently meaningful, stable, and coherent universe. In the postmodern cosmos, truth is always fluid: unstable, relative, and subjective.

## **Acknowledging Power Struggles as Central to Human Communication**

If reality isn't an absolute and truth is a matter of subjective interpretation, then all descriptions of reality are actually just attempts to convince others of the legitimacy of a particular point of view or to define a situation the way the describer sees it. Whenever we hear people talk about things "everyone knows are true" (or "universal," "natural," or "proper"), we better watch out, because they're really just trying to bend us to their way of seeing things, to *seize the narrative*. In a postmodern world with no universal truth, there are only competing truths. And at the heart of this competition is a hunger for power.

The French postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault was particularly interested in the way power is intertwined with *discourse*, which is jargon for any particular interpretive viewpoint. Foucault noted that historical periods come to be dominated by a narrative that defines events through its particular assumptions. That *dominant discourse* is often slapped with the label *hegemony*, an old Greek word that today denotes a controlling influence over others by a ruling elite that defines the truth its way, seizing control of a culture through its version of things. That controlling narrative excludes or suppresses what does not comfortably fit; defines what is legitimate, sane, or reasonable; and causes people to subordinate their perceptions to acceptable "common knowledge" by a process of definition and conformity. Since grand narratives pretend there is an order to the universe, they must eliminate any disorder—that is, anything outside the mainstream narrative. Power is therefore mostly about controlling the narrative. We can easily see this principle in operation in the world of contemporary politics where political operatives want to "spin" a story their direction or "frame" a discussion in terms favorable to their views. All information is suspect in the postmodern conception. Knowledge is just a commodity to be managed for advantage and gain. There are no *innocent* or objective texts; all are *implicated* or stuck in a particular point of view.

In postmodern thought, we cannot extricate ourselves from the power struggles inherent in our use of language to define and seize our world.

## **What Postmodernism Does**

In the light of these three basic notions of most postmodern Theory, what does a postmodern critic *do*?

If language is untrustworthy and arbitrary, if any explanation of meaning is a falsification because there are no universal truths or coherent absolute standards valid for all people, and if all discourse is ultimately about gaining and keeping power, where does that leave us? Since postmodernism rejects all worldviews, it cannot offer a worldview. Since it challenges all dogma, it cannot be a dogma. Since it disdains all theories, why all this talk of Theory?

The answer of postmodern thinkers: their work is not a dogma but a *practice* of ongoing investigation and challenge. They don't have a new master narrative or grand theory, just a revolution of permanent deconstruction.

*Deconstruction* is the main tool of postmodernism. Its use can be traced in the work of the influential French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), who substituted a belief in infinite play for a belief in absolute truth. He believed the meaning of any text was never absolutely fixed or decided; every text is infinitely reinterpretable, and this should be as fun as making and destroying sand castles. In his work, he saw deconstruction as a reading strategy, a practice of skeptical critical analysis, and a habit of *problemitizing* or *penetrating the disguises* of any text—that is, calling into question its unconscious assertions, contradictions, gaps, distortions, and omissions. In other words, deconstruction is a kind of intellectual crowbar used to pry up the smooth surfaces of a text and expose the hidden construction methods, fractures, and flaws underneath.

Thus, creating a new tradition is not the postmodern goal; disruption and subversion of existing traditions is closer to the mark. The responsibility of the postmodern critic is to question all grand narratives, to expose and critique myths masquerading as truths, to treat common assumptions skeptically, to bring excluded voices into the conversation, to examine not reality but what is said about reality, and to deconstruct all our socially constructed notions.

But how does all this relate to literature?

## **Benefits of Postmodernism**

Postmodernism has given new tools to writers and readers of literature.

Writers of the last half-century have been visibly affected by postmodern ideas. In many noteworthy stories and novels, we can find a postmodern skepticism about language and grand narratives and a resulting willingness to challenge, subvert, and deconstruct all the old assumptions about how literary art should work—often with a high dose of self-consciousness, irony, and playfulness. In his short story “Lost in the Funhouse,” for example, John Barth tells his tale and simultaneously adds a running commentary on the writing tricks he’s using to tell his tale. This ironic wink draws attention to the artificiality of the whole endeavor of writing fiction. Thus Barth’s story is both examining the world—the task that fiction has traditionally set out to accomplish—but also examining the art form of fiction, questioning it as another system of meaning.

Postmodern writers play around with language, blur the traditional line between author and text (in his novel *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien names his main character Tim O'Brien), undercut their own narrative authority (in his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles steps into his story and flips a coin to decide which of two endings he likes best), deconstruct past works (in his comic play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Tom Stoppard appropriates two characters from Shakespeare's tragic play *Hamlet*), and transgress old genre boundaries (in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut links a time-traveling science fiction story complete with little green aliens to a gritty war novel and a moving memoir). In all these ways and more, postmodern narratives call into question the endeavor of creating narratives.

In addition, poets and novelists by their originality and inventiveness continually renew our language, create new metaphors, coin fresh expressions, and thus foster new ways of thinking and new descriptions of the self, the world, and the human condition. In other words, literary artists are habitually involved with that defamiliarization of language that postmodern philosophers promote (usually in far more deadening prose).

Postmodern ideas can be as useful to readers as they are to writers. To start with, postmodernism encourages paying close, rigorous attention to texts.

The postmodern sense of the arbitrariness and subjectivity of language means that ultimately all reading leads to *enigma*, the sense that a text will never surrender itself to our need for perfect clarity, that it is endlessly open to interpretation and reinterpretation, and that it offers multiple meanings. This is good news and bad news: it means we get to deal with both the never-ending excitement and the never-ending anxiety of knowing that there's always more to be known, more to be understood, and more to be misunderstood. But more is always promised by the postmodern attitude. No one ever has the final word on interpreting a text.

The postmodern sense about the untrustworthiness of totalizing grand narratives leaves us open to multiple critical approaches, multiple interpretations, and multiple voices. We are invited to examine and deconstruct the contradictions in all texts. We are encouraged to challenge the authority of authors, the assumptions they make, and the truths they espouse—all good habits for a democracy dependent on critical thinkers and readers.

The postmodern suspicion of power leads to ceaseless questioning. Postmodern Theory views literature not as a body of knowledge to be mastered or a set of others' interpretations to be swallowed but rather as an *arena of social practice* within which *meanings are negotiated* and fought over. In other words, readers are encouraged to participate in lively ongoing debates about any text and any “commonly accepted” or “expert” interpretations and to question whose viewpoints are being promoted and privileged. Widening the aperture, readers are encouraged to debate the whole literary canon, asking how texts that are considered “great works”—even those taught in school—might simply reflect systems of power that have *marginalized* too many voices.

Finally, postmodern Theory has implications that transcend the realm of literature. Postmodern thinkers have noted that all cultural practices are language based and socially constructed. In this light, every cultural act becomes a *text*, because any human activity or product can be *read*—that is, decoded, interpreted, analyzed, evaluated, and deconstructed. Thus, the concept of a text has been stretched beyond just written texts to any form of interpretation. The postmodern project encourages us to decode and deconstruct not just literature but anything: advertising, political rhetoric, TV drama, images of beauty, fashion, whatever. The field of *cultural studies* has grown up as a postmodern discipline parallel to literary studies, examining all cultural practices, their uses of language, and their relationship to power. Postmodernism invites us to read our culture with the same attention and awareness with which we read our books.

## Limitations and Critiques of Postmodernism

For all its influence, postmodernism has attracted criticisms like magnets draw iron filings. One criticism is that it is actually just a tortuously complicated expression of what is really not that profound an idea: great texts are complex and have multiple meanings.

Another common objection to Theory is to the bewilderingly obscure language that characterizes much postmodern prose, jargon glutted with off-putting words like *valorization*, *transgressive*, *narrativity*, and all the other italicized words in this essay. Proponents, of course, say that new ideas require a new vocabulary, but critics say the dense argot leaves most of us in the dust, dependent on specialists to do the interpreting.

Another beef with deconstruction is really with its cultural studies offshoot and its fascination with social phenomena—from Elvis to Barbie Dolls to body piercing—no matter how obscure or trivial. According to this complaint, this fascination is a poor substitute for literature’s courageous willingness to address life’s big issues—justice, love, death, God. An article a few years ago in the satirical publication *The Onion* may have best expressed this critique: “Grad Student Deconstructs Take-Out Menu at the Burrito Bandit.” The message: Shouldn’t we be interpreting more consequential texts?

Another problem that has been pointed out about postmodernism is its skepticism about objective truth. If idealistic values that we label as reason, democracy, justice, morality, progress, and human rights are not eternal truths but simply narratives used by people to protect their power and privilege, how do we ever engage people in believing in or fighting for a better world? Postmodernism’s cynicism is a blow to idealism.

Perhaps the most damning criticism of postmodern deconstruction is that it leads nowhere. Or that it leads—at best—to the same conclusion about any story, poem, or novel: that it’s contradictory, incoherent, and ultimately *undecidable*. Once we’ve deconstructed everything, then what?

## To Sum Up

Postmodern thinking has become part of our literary world. Its ideas have captured the imaginations of a couple of generations of scholars and writers. The habits encouraged by postmodernism's big ideas—a sense of language's instability and flexibility, a skepticism about grandiose “this and only this is what a text means” pronouncements, and a critical attitude about the power-seeking dimensions of discourse—all can add to a reader's skills.