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# LITERARY CRITICISM

An Introduction  
to Theory and Practice

FIFTH EDITION

Charles E. Bressler  
*Indiana Wesleyan University*

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# 1

## DEFINING CRITICISM, THEORY, AND LITERATURE

*Criticism should be a casual conversation.*

W. H. Auden, *The Table Talk of W. H. Auden*

### LISTENING TO A CONVERSATION

I imagine for a moment that you are sitting at the food court of a local shopping mall. Your seat is front and center, the chair located closest to the mall's walkway where all the shoppers have to pass you by as they continue seeking out those bargains while chatting with their friends. Sipping on your energy-boosting fruit drink, you begin reading your copy of the local newspaper. As you read, you cannot help but overhear a conversation between a middle-aged woman and her teenage son as they stop in front of you:

"Mom, can I have five dollars to go to the arcade while you shop for shoes for your dinner party next week?"

"No! I want you to come with me to the store to help me pick out my new shoes. I want to buy something a little daring, and I need your support."

"But, Mom, what do I know about shoes for you? I promised to meet some of my friends at the arcade around noon, and it is already 12:49!"

"Tim, I really want you to come, but if you want to go to the arcade, just go. Here's the money."

As you look up, the smiling teen grabs the bills from his mother's hand and saunters cockily to the arcade. As his mom is walking away with a somewhat saddened look on her face, you wonder how she is feeling. Is she disappointed? Angry? Hurt? Did she really expect her son to join her as she tried on pair after pair of shoes? Should she even have asked him to go with her in the first place? And what about Tim? Is he a spoiled brat? Does he hold a part-time job after school? Is he an only child, or is he the first or the

last born of many. These and similar questions keep popping into your head as you watch both mother and son separate and travel in opposite directions.

By listening to this parent-child conversation, you became, in a real sense, a part of it. For a moment the concerns of the two participants became part of your world. You looked at them, evaluated their social positions, thought about their feelings, and conjectured about the social structure of their family. And even your personal feelings were temporarily affected, for you observed that as Tim walked away, a saddened look appeared on his mother's face. The conversation being over, you then returned to your reading of the newspaper. Briefly, however, you became an observer of this mother and son's story. As if they were in a story, you "read" not only what was said, but what was left unsaid, for you imagined their feelings, their desires, and the results of their interaction. You filled in the gaps about their characters while simultaneously developing them not as they really were, but as you personally imagined them to be. Being an outsider, you quickly became a participant in the actions of their tale, asking questions about the nature of the characters, the events of their story, and their and your emotional responses to the story line. Although you were not literally reading a text, you asked the same kinds of questions that a literary critic asks when reading a work of fiction. Like a literary critic, you became an evaluator, an interpreter; and for a moment, a participant in the story itself.

As you overheard the voices of the two characters—the mother and son—in their story, similarly literary critics eavesdrop on the multiple conversations in literary works. To help them articulate and analyze their eavesdropping, critics assign names to the various elements of the multiple conversations of which they become a part: author, reader, narrator, narratee, and so forth. One such critic, the Russian writer, essayist, and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) coined the term dialogic heteroglossia ("many voices in multiple conversations") to explain the various conversations occurring in one such literary genre, the novel. All genres, however, have developed such technical vocabulary to explain not only their constituent elements but also avenues to discovering their meanings.

Let us now eavesdrop on another conversation taking place about a short story.

## EAVESDROPPING ON A LITERATURE CLASSROOM

Having assigned her literature class Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and knowing O'Connor's canon and her long list of curious protagonists, Dr. Lisa Toland could not anticipate whether her students would greet her with excitement, silence, bewilderment, or frustration when asked to discuss this short story. Her curiosity would soon be

satisfied, for as she stood before the class, she asked a seemingly simple, direct question: "What do you believe O'Connor is trying to tell us in this story? In other words, how do you, as readers, interpret this text?"

Although some students stared out the window while others suddenly found the covers of their anthologies fascinating, a few raised their hands. Given a nod from Dr. Toland, Alice was the first to respond. "I believe O'Connor is trying to tell us the state of the family in rural Georgia during the 1950s. Just look at how the children, June Star and John Wesley, behave. They don't respect their grandmother. In fact, they mock her."

"But she deserves to be mocked," interrupted Peter. "Her life is one big act. She wants to act like a lady—to wear white cotton gloves and carry a purse—but she really cares only for herself. She is selfish, self-centered, and arrogant."

"That may be," responded Karen, "but I think the real message of O'Connor's story is not about family or one particular character, but about a philosophy of life. O'Connor uses the Misfit to articulate her personal view of life. When the Misfit says Jesus has thrown 'everything off balance,' O'Connor is really asking each of her readers either to choose his or her own way of life or to follow the teachings of Jesus. In effect, O'Connor is saying we all have a choice: to live for ourselves or to live for and through others."

"I don't think we should bring Christianity or any other religion into the story," said George. "By analyzing O'Connor's individual words—words like tall, dark, and deep—and noting how often she repeats them and in what context, we can deduce that O'Connor's text, not O'Connor herself or her view of life, is melancholy and a bit dark. But to equate O'Connor's personal philosophy about life with the meaning of this particular story is somewhat silly."

"But we can't forget that O'Connor is a woman," said Betty, "and an educated one at that! Her story has little to do with an academic or pie-in-the-sky, meaningless philosophical discussion, but a lot to do with being a woman. Being raised in the South, O'Connor would know and would have experienced prejudice because she is female. And as we all know, the Southern male's opinion of women is that they are to be kept 'barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen,' and to be as nondescript as Bailey's wife is in this story. Unlike all the other characters, we don't even know this woman's name. How much more nondescriptive could O'Connor be? O'Connor's message is simple: Women are oppressed and suppressed. If they open their mouths, if they have an opinion, and if they voice that opinion, they will end up like the grandmother, with a bullet in their head."

"I don't think that's her point at all," said Barb. "I do agree that she is writing from personal experience about the South, but her main point is about prejudice itself—prejudice against African Americans. Through the voice of the grandmother, we see the Southern lady's opinion of African Americans: They are inferior to whites, uneducated, poor, and basically ignorant. O'Connor's main point is that we are all equal."

"Yes, I agree," said Mike. "But if we look at this story in the context of all the other stories we have read this semester, I see a theme we have often discussed: appearance versus reality. This is O'Connor's main point. The grandmother acts like a lady—someone who cares about others—but inwardly she cares only for herself. Basically, she's a hypocrite."

"I disagree. In fact, I disagree with everybody," shouted Daniel. "I like the grandmother. She reminds me of my grandmother. O'Connor's grandmother is a bit self-centered, but whose old grandmother isn't? Like my grandma, O'Connor's grandmother likes to be around her grandchildren, to read and to play with them. She's funny and she has spunk. And she even likes cats."

"But, Dr. Toland, can we ever know what Flannery O'Connor really thinks about this story?" asked Jessica. "After all, she's dead, and she didn't write an essay telling us what the story actually means. And since she never tells us its meaning, can't the story have more than one meaning?"

Dr. Toland instantly realized that Jessica's query—Can a story have multiple meanings?—is a pivotal question not only for English professors and their students but also for anyone who reads any text.

### CAN A TEXT HAVE MORE THAN ONE INTERPRETATION?

A quick glance at the discussion of O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" in Dr. Toland's classroom reveals that not all readers interpret texts in the same way. In fact, all of the eight students who voiced their understandings of the story gave fundamentally different interpretations. Was only one of these eight interpretations correct and the remaining seven wrong? If so, how can one arrive at the correct interpretation? Put another way, if there is only one correct interpretation of a text, what are the hermeneutical principles (the rules of interpretation) readers must use to discover this interpretation? Should each of the eight students attempt to reconstruct the intentions O'Connor held while writing her story or the meaning her story had for her readers in the 1950s (hermeneutics of recovery)? Or should each student attempt to examine O'Connor's unspoken but implied assumptions concerning politics, sexuality, religion, linguistics, and a host of other topics (hermeneutics of suspicion)? By so doing, O'Connor's work can then have multiple interpretations. Are all of these various and often contradictory interpretations valid? Can and should each interpretation be considered a satisfactory and legitimate analysis of the text? In other words, can a text mean anything a reader declares it to mean, or are there guiding principles for interpreting a text that must be followed if a reader is to arrive at a valid interpretation? And who can declare that one's interpretation is valid or legitimate? English professors? Professional critics? Published scholars? Any reader?

Need a reader, however, be thinking of any of these particulars when reading a text? Can't one simply enjoy a novel without considering its interpretation? Need one be able to state the work's theme, discuss its structure, or analyze its tone to enjoy the actual act of reading the work itself?

These and similar questions are the domain of literary criticism: the act of studying, analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, and enjoying a work of art. At first glance, the study of literary criticism may appear daunting and formidable. Jargon such as hermeneutics, Aristotelian poetics, metaphysics of presence, deconstruction, and many other intimidating terms confront the would-be literary critic. Nevertheless, the actual process or act of literary criticism is not as ominous as it may first appear.

### HOW TO BECOME A LITERARY CRITIC

When the students in Dr. Toland's class were discussing O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," each of them was directly responding to the instructor's initial question: What do you believe O'Connor is trying to tell us in and through this story? Although not all responses were radically different (each student viewed the story from a unique perspective), for example, some students expressed a liking for the grandmother, but others thought her a selfish, arrogant woman. Still others believed O'Connor was voicing a variety of philosophical, social, and cultural concerns, such as the place of women and African Americans in Southern society, or adherence to tenets of Christianity as the foundation for one's view of life, or the structure of the family in rural Georgia in the 1950s. All had an opinion about and, therefore, an interpretation of O'Connor's short story.

When Dr. Toland's students stated their personal interpretations of O'Connor's text, they had become practicing literary critics. All of them had already interacted with the story, thinking about their likes and dislikes of the various characters; their impressions of the setting, plot, and structure; and their overall assessment of the story itself, whether that assessment was a full-fledged interpretation that seeks to explain every facet of the text or simply bewilderment as to the story's overall meaning. None of the students, however, had had formal training in literary criticism. None knew the somewhat complicated jargon (discourse) of literary theory. And none were acquainted with any of the formal and informal schools of literary criticism.

What each student had done was to have read the story. The reading process itself produced within the students an array of responses, taking the form of questions, statements, opinions, and feelings evoked by the text. It is these responses coupled with the text itself that are the concerns of literary criticism and theory.

Although these students may need to master the terminology, the many philosophical approaches, and the diverse methodologies of formal literary criticism to become trained literary critics, they automatically became literary critics as they read and thought about O'Connor's text. They needed no formal training in literary criticism or working understanding of literary theory. By mastering the concepts of formal literary criticism and theory, however, these students, like all readers, can become critical readers who are better able to understand and articulate their own reactions and analyze those of others to any given text.

## WHAT IS LITERARY CRITICISM?

Matthew Arnold, a nineteenth-century literary critic, describes literary criticism as "A disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world." Implicit in this definition is that literary criticism is a disciplined activity that attempts to describe, study, analyze, justify, interpret, and evaluate a work of art. By necessity, Arnold would argue, this discipline attempts to formulate aesthetic and methodological principles on which the critic can evaluate a text. Anyone who attempts to evaluate texts in this fashion is a literary critic, a term derived from two Greek words, *krino*, meaning "to judge" and *krites*, meaning "a judge or jury person." A literary critic, or *kritikos*, is, therefore, a "judge of literature." The first recorded such judge is the fourth century BCE teacher Philitas, who arrived in Alexandria in 305 BCE to tutor a child who would become King Ptolemy II. When judging literature, Philitas was actively engaged in the disciplined activities of literary criticism.

When we consider its function and its relationship to texts, literary criticism is not usually considered a discipline in and of itself, for it must be related to something else—that is, a work of art. Without the work of art, the activity of criticism cannot exist. And it is through this discerning activity of criticism that we can knowingly and deliberately explore the questions that help define our humanity, critique our culture, evaluate our actions and feelings, or simply increase our appreciation and enjoyment of both a literary work and our fellow human beings.

When analyzing a text, literary critics ask basic questions such as these about the philosophical, psychological, functional, and descriptive nature of the text itself:

- Does a text have only one correct meaning?
- Is a text always didactic; that is, must a reader learn something from every text?
- Can a text be read only for enjoyment?
- Does a text affect each reader in the same way?

p. 10 (Resonance)

- How is a text influenced by the culture of its author and the culture in which it is written?
- What part or function does gender play in the writing or the reading of a text?
- How do our personal feelings affect our interpretation of a text?
- Can a text become a catalyst for change in a given culture?

Since the time of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle and continuing to the present day, critics and readers have been hotly debating the answers to these and similar questions. By asking questions of O'Connor's or any other text and by contemplating answers, we, too, can participate in this ongoing conversation. We can question, for example, the grandmother's motives in O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" for wanting to take her cat on the family's vacation. Or we can ask if the presence of the Misfit and his companions is the primary reason the grandmother experiences her epiphany. No matter what question we may ask concerning O'Connor's text, we are participating in the ongoing debate of the value and enjoyment of O'Connor's short story while simultaneously engaging in literary criticism and functioning as practical literary critics.

Traditionally, literary critics involve themselves in either theoretical or practical criticism. **Theoretical criticism** formulates the theories, principles, and tenets of the nature and value of art. By citing general aesthetic and moral principles of art, theoretical criticism provides the necessary framework for practical criticism. **Practical criticism** (also known as **applied criticism**) applies the theories and tenets of theoretical criticism to a particular work. Using the theories and principles of theoretical criticism, the practical critic defines the standards of taste and explains, evaluates, or justifies a particular piece of literature. A further distinction is made between the practical critic who posits that there is only one theory or set of principles a critic may use when evaluating a literary work—the **absolutist critic**—and the **relativistic critic**, one who uses various and even contradictory theories in critiquing a text. The basis for either kind of critic, or any form of criticism, is literary theory. Without theory, practical criticism could not exist.

## WHAT IS LITERARY THEORY?

When reading O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," we necessarily interact with the text, asking many specific, text-related questions and, oftentimes, rather personal ones as well. For example, such questions as these may concern us, the readers:

- What kind of person is the grandmother? Is she like my grandmother or any grandmother I know?

- What is the function or role of June Star? John Wesley? Bailey? The children's mother?
- Why was the grandmother taking Pitty Sing, the cat, on the family vacation?
- What is the significance of the restaurant scene at The Tower?
- Right before she is shot, what does the grandmother recognize about the Misfit? What is the significance of this recognition?

Such questions immediately involve us in practical criticism. What we tend to forget during the reading of O'Connor's short story or any other text is that we have already read other literary works (intertextuality). Our response to any text—or the principles of practical criticism we apply to it—is largely a conditioned or socially constructed one; that is, how we arrive at meaning in fiction is, in part, determined by our experiences. Consciously or unconsciously, we have developed a mind-set or framework that accommodates our expectations when reading a novel, short story, poem, or any other type of literature. In addition, what we choose to value or uphold as good or bad, moral or immoral, beautiful or ugly within a given text actually depends on this ever-evolving framework. When we can clearly articulate our personal philosophical framework when reading a text and explain how this mind-set directly influences our values and aesthetic judgments about a text, we are well on our way to developing a coherent, unified literary theory—the assumptions (conscious or unconscious) that undergird our understanding and interpretation of language, the ways we construct meaning, and our understanding of art, culture, aesthetics, and ideologies. Whereas literary criticism involves our analysis of a text (literary theory concerns itself with our understanding of the ideas, concepts, and intellectual assumptions upon which rests our actual literary critique).

Because anyone who responds to a text is already a practicing literary critic and because practical criticism is rooted in the reader's preconditioned expectations (his or her mind-set) when actually reading a text, every reader espouses some kind of literary theory. Each reader's theory may be conscious or unconscious, whole or partial, informed or ill informed, eclectic or unified. An incomplete, unconscious, and therefore, unclear literary theory more frequently than not leads to illogical, unsound, and haphazard interpretations. On the other hand, a well-defined, logical, and clearly articulated theory enables readers to develop a method by which to establish principles that enable them to justify, order, and clarify their own appraisals of a text in a consistent manner.

A better understanding of literary theory can be gained by investigating the etymology of the word theory itself. Derived from the Greek word *theoria*, the word *theory* means a "view or perspective of the Greek stage." Literary theory, then, offers to us a view of life, an understanding of why we interpret texts the way we do. Consider the various places in the theater that we, the audience, may sit. Depending on our seats—whether close to the

stage, far back, to the far left, to the far right, or in the middle row—our view and, therefore, our interpretation of the events taking place on the stage will alter. Literary theory figuratively and literally asks where we are "sitting" when we are reading a text. What exactly is influencing us during the reading process? Is it our culture? Is it our understanding of the nature of literature itself? Is it our political, religious, or social views? Is it our family background? These and similar questions (and their answers) will directly and indirectly and consciously and unconsciously be affecting our interpretation and our enjoyment, or lack thereof, of a text. To be able to articulate such underlying assumptions about how we read texts will enable us, the readers, to establish for ourselves a lucid and logical practical criticism.

A well-articulated literary theory also assumes that an innocent reading of a text or a sheerly emotional or spontaneous reaction to a work does not exist because literary theory questions the assumptions, beliefs, and feelings of readers, asking why they respond to a text in a certain way. In a very real sense, literary theory causes us to question our commonsense interpretation of a text, asking us to probe beneath our initial responses. According to a consistent literary theory, a simple emotional or intuitive response to a text does not explain the underlying factors that caused such a reaction. What elicits that response, or how the reader constructs meaning through or with the text, is what matters.

## MAKING MEANING FROM TEXT

How we as readers construct meaning through or with a text depends on the mental framework each of us has developed and continues to develop concerning the nature of reality. This framework or worldview consists of the assumptions or presuppositions that we all hold (either consciously or unconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world. For example, we all struggle to find answers to such questions as these:

- What is the basis of morality or ethics?
- What is the meaning of human history?
- What happens at the moment of death?
- Is there an overarching purpose for humanity's existence?
- What is beauty? Truth? Goodness?
- Is there an ultimate reality?

Interestingly our answers to these and other questions do not remain static, for as we interact with other people, our environment, our culture, and our own inner selves, we are continually shaping and developing our personal philosophies, rejecting former ideas and replacing them with newly discovered



ones. It is our dynamic answers—including our doubts and fears about these answers—that largely determine our response to a literary text.

Upon such a conceptual framework rests literary theory. Whether that framework is well reasoned or simply a matter of habit and past teachings, readers respond to works of art via their worldview. From this philosophical core of beliefs spring their evaluations of the goodness, worthiness, and value of art itself. Using their worldviews either consciously or unconsciously as a yardstick by which to measure and value their experiences, readers respond to individual works of literature, ordering and valuing each separate or collective experience in each text based on the system of beliefs housed in their worldviews.

## THE READING PROCESS AND LITERARY THEORY

The relationship between literary theory and a reader's personal worldview is best illustrated in the act of reading itself. When reading, we are constantly interacting with the text. According to Louise M. Rosenblatt's text *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978), during the act or event of reading,

A reader brings to the text his or her past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, the reader marshals his or her resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he/she sees as the poem. This becomes part of the ongoing stream of the reader's life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to him or her as a human being.

Rosenblatt declares that the relationship between the reader and the text is not linear, but transactional; that is, it is a process or event that takes place at a particular time and place in which the text and the reader condition each other. The reader and the text transact—not simply interact—creating meaning, for meaning does not exist solely within the reader's mind or within the text, Rosenblatt maintains, but in the transaction between them. To arrive at an interpretation of a text (what Rosenblatt calls the poem), readers bring their own "temperament and fund of past transactions to the text [what some critics call forestructure] and live through a process of handling new situations, new attitudes, new personalities, [and] new conflicts in value. They can reject, revise, or assimilate into the resource with which they engage their world." Through this transactional experience, readers consciously and unconsciously amend their worldviews.

Because no literary theory can account for all the various factors included in everyone's conceptual framework, and because we as readers all have different literary experiences, there can exist no metatheory—no single overarching literary theory that encompasses all possible interpretations of a

text suggested by its readers. And there can be no single correct literary theory, for in and of itself, each literary theory asks valid questions of and about a text, and no one theory is capable of exhausting all legitimate questions to be asked about any text.

The valid and legitimate questions asked about a text by the various literary theories differ, often widely. Espousing separate critical orientations, each theory focuses primarily on one element of the interpretative process, although in practice different theories may address several areas of concern in interpreting a text. For example, one theory may stress the work itself, believing that the text alone contains all the necessary information to arrive at an interpretation. This theory isolates the text from its historical or sociological setting and concentrates on the literary forms found in the text, such as figures of speech (tropes), word choice (diction), and style. Another theory may attempt to place a text in its historical, political, sociological, religious, and economic settings. By placing the text in historical perspective, this theory asserts that its adherents can arrive at an interpretation that both the text's author and its original audience would support. Still another theory may direct its chief concern toward the text's audience. It asks how readers' emotions and personal backgrounds affect each reader's interpretation of a particular text. Whether the primary focus is psychological, linguistic, mythical, historical, or from any other critical orientation, each literary theory establishes its own theoretical basis, then proceeds to develop its own methodology whereby readers can apply the particular theory to an actual text. In effect, each literary theory or perspective is like taking a different seat in the theater and thereby obtaining a different view of the stage. Different literary theories and theorists may all study the same text, but being in different seats, the various literary theorists will all respond differently to the text—or the performance on the stage—because of their unique perspectives.

Although each reader's theory and methodology for arriving at a text's interpretation may differ, sooner or later groups of readers and critics declare allegiance to a similar core of beliefs and band together, founding schools of criticism. For example, critics who believe that social and historical concerns must be highlighted in a text are known as Marxist critics, whereas reader-oriented critics (sometimes referred to as reader-response critics) concentrate on readers' personal reactions to the text. Because new points of view concerning literary works are continually evolving, new schools of criticism—and, therefore, new literary theories—will continue to develop. One of the more recent schools to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, New Historicism of Cultural Poetics, declares that a text must be analyzed through historical research that assumes that history and fiction are inseparable. The members of this school, known as New Historicists, hope to shift the boundaries between history and literature and thereby produce criticism that reflects what they believe to be the proper relationship between the text and its historical context. Still other newly evolving schools of criticism, such

as postcolonialism, African American studies, gender studies, queer theory, and ecocriticism, continue to emerge and challenge previous ways of thinking about and critiquing texts.

Because the various schools of criticism (and the theories on which they are based) ask different questions about the same work of literature, these theoretical schools provide an abundance of options from which readers can choose to broaden their understanding not only of texts but also of their society, their culture, and their own humanity. By embracing literary theory, we learn about literature, but more important, we are also taught tolerance for other people's beliefs. By rejecting or ignoring theory, we are in danger of canonizing ourselves as literary saints who possess divine knowledge and who can, therefore, supply the one and only correct interpretation for a given text. When we oppose, disregard, or ignore literary theory, we are in danger of blindly accepting our more frequently than not unquestioned prejudices and assumptions. By embracing literary theory and literary criticism (its practical application), we can willingly participate in that seemingly endless historical conversation about the nature of humanity and of humanity's concerns as expressed in literature. And in the process, we can begin to question our concepts of ourselves, our society, and our culture and how texts themselves help define and continually redefine these concepts.

## WHAT IS LITERATURE? • See Eschen

Because literary criticism presupposes that there exists a work of literature to be interpreted, we could assume that formulating a definition of literature would be simple. This is, however, not the case. For centuries, writers, literary historians, and others have debated about but have failed to agree on a definition for this term. Some assume that literature is simply anything that is written, thereby declaring a city telephone directory, a cookbook, and a road atlas to be literary works along with *Pride and Prejudice* and the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Derived from the Latin *littera*, meaning "letter," the root meaning of the word *literature* refers primarily to the written word and seems to support this broad definition. Yet such a definition eliminates the important oral traditions upon which much of our literature is based, including Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the English epic *Beowulf*, and many Native American legends, among many other examples.

To solve this difficulty, others choose to define literature as an art, thereby leaving open the question of its being written or oral. This definition further narrows its meaning, equating literature to works of the imagination or creative writing. To emphasize the imaginative qualities of literature, some critics choose to use the German word for literature, *Wortkunst*, instead of its English equivalent, because *Wortkunst* automatically implies that the

imaginative and creative aspects of literature are essential components of the word *literature* itself. By this definition, written works such as a telephone directory or a cookbook can no longer be considered literature; these kinds of works are superseded by poetry, drama, fiction, and other imaginative writing. Some scholars believe that the imaginative qualities of a work of literature were first articulated for Western literature in a work written by the French Baroness Madame de Staël, a German Romantic theorist, who in 1800 authored *On Literature Considered in Its Relations with Social Institutions*.

Although the narrowing of the definition of literature accomplished by equating it to the defining terms of art seemingly simplifies what can and cannot be considered a literary work, such is not the case. That the J. Crew and Victoria's Secret clothes catalogues are imaginative (and colorful) writing is unquestioned, but should they then be considered works of literature? Who declares whether a written document is a work of art? Many readers assume that if an imaginative work of fiction is published—be it singly or in an anthology—such a work is worthy to be read. It has, after all, been judged acceptable as a literary work and has been published and presumably approved by an editorial board. This belief that published works are deemed worthy to be dubbed literature is called the **hyperprotected cooperative principle**, that is, published works have been evaluated and declared literary texts by a group of well-informed people who are protecting the overall canon of literature. But even this principle does not stop many from arguing that some published works are unworthy to be called works of art or literature. Specifying and narrowing the definition of literature to a "work of art" does not, then, immediately provide consensus or a consistent rule about how to declare a text a "work of literature."

Whether one accepts the broad or narrow definition, many argue that a text must have certain peculiar qualities before it can be dubbed "literature." Those who hold this view believe that an artist's creation or secondary world often mirrors the author's primary world, the world in which the writer lives and moves and breathes. Because reality or the primary world is highly structured, the secondary world must also be so structured. To achieve this structure, the artist must create plot, character, tone, symbols, conflict, and a host of other elements or parts of the artistic story, with all of these elements working in a dynamic relationship to produce a literary work. Some would argue that it is the creation of these elements—how they are used and in what context—that determines whether a piece of writing is literature.

Still other critics add the "test of time" criterion to their essential components of literature. If a work such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* or *La Divina Commedia* (1308–1321) withstands the passage of time and is still being read centuries after its creation, it is deemed valuable and worthy to be called literature. This criterion also denotes literature's functional or cultural value: If people value a written work, for whatever reason, they often declare it to be literature whether or not it contains the prescribed elements of a text.



What this work may contain is a peculiar aesthetic quality—that is, some element of beauty—that distinguishes it as literature from other forms of writing. Aesthetics, the branch of philosophy that deals with the concept of the beautiful, strives to determine the criteria for beauty in a work of art. Theorists such as Plato and Aristotle declare that the source of beauty is inherent within the art object itself; other critics, such as David Hume, maintain that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And some contemporary theorists argue that one's perception of beauty in a text rests in the dynamic relationship between the object (the text) and the perceiver (the reader) at a given moment in time. Wherever the criteria for judging beauty of a work of art finally resides, most critics agree that a work of literature does have an appealing aesthetic quality.

While distinguishing literature from other forms of writing, this appealing aesthetic quality directly contributes to literature's chief purpose: telling a story. Although it may simultaneously communicate facts, literature's primary aim is to tell a story. The subject of this story is particularly human, describing and detailing a variety of human experiences, not stating facts or bits and pieces of information. For example, literature does not define the word courage but shows us a courageous character acting courageously. By so doing, literature concretizes an array of human values, emotions, actions, and ideas in story form. It is this concretization that allows us to experience vicariously the stories of a host of characters. Through these characters, we observe people in action, making decisions, struggling to maintain their humanity in often inhumane circumstances, and embodying for us a variety of values and human characteristics that we may embrace, discard, enjoy, or detest.

## LITERARY THEORY AND THE DEFINITION OF LITERATURE

Is literature simply a story that contains certain aesthetic and literary qualities that all somehow pleasingly culminate in a work of art? If so, can texts be considered artifacts that can be analyzed, dissected, and studied to discover their essential nature or meaning? Or does a literary work have ontological status; that is, does it exist in and of itself, perhaps in a special neo-Platonic realm? Or must it have an audience, a reader, before it becomes literature? And can we even define the word text? Is it simply print on a page? If pictures are included, do they automatically become part of the text? Who determines, then, when print becomes a work of art? The reader? The author? Both?

The answers to these and similar questions have been long debated, and the various responses make up the corpus of literary theory. Literary theory offers a variety of methodologies that enable readers to interpret a

text from different and often conflicting points of view. By so doing, it asks pertinent and often controversial questions concerning the philosophical assumptions surrounding the nature of the reading process, the epistemological nature of learning, the nature of reality itself, and a host of related concerns. Such theorizing empowers readers to examine their personal worldviews, to articulate their individual assumptions about the nature of reality and to understand how these assumptions directly affect their interpretations not only of a work of art but also of the definition of literature itself.

Although any definition of literature is debatable, most would agree that an examination of a text's total artistic situation would help us decide what constitutes literature. This total picture of the work involves such elements as the work itself (e.g., an examination of the fictionality or secondary world created within the story), the artist, the universe or world the work supposedly represents, and the audience or readers. Although readers and critics will emphasize one, two, or even three of these elements while deemphasizing the others, such a consideration of a text's artistic situation immediately broadens the definition of literature from the concept that it is simply a written work that contains certain qualities to a definition that must include the dynamic interrelationship of the actual text and the readers. Perhaps, then, the literary competence of the readers themselves helps determine whether a work should be considered literature. If this is so, then a literary work may be more functional than ontological, its existence and, therefore, its value being determined by its readers and not by the work itself.

Overall, the definition of literature depends on the particular kind of literary theory or school of criticism that the reader or critic espouses. For Formalists, for example, the text and text alone contains certain qualities that make a particular piece of writing literature. On the other hand, for reader-oriented critics, the interaction and psychological relationships between the text and the reader help determine whether a document should be deemed literary. A working knowledge of literary theory can thus help all readers formulate their ever-developing definition of literature and what they believe constitutes a literary work.

## THE FUNCTION OF LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORY

Critics continually debate literature's chief function. Tracing their arguments to Plato, many contend that literature's primary function is moral, its chief value being its usefulness for cultural or societal purposes. But others, like Aristotle, hold that a work of art can be analyzed and broken down into its various parts, with each part contributing to the overall enjoyment of the

work itself. For these critics, the value of a text is found within the text itself or is inseparably linked to the work itself. In its most simple terms, the debate centers around two concerns: Is literature's chief function to teach (extrinsic) or to entertain (intrinsic)? In other words, can we read a text for the sheer fun of it, or must we always be studying and learning from what we read?

Such questions and their various answers lead us directly to literary theory because literary theory concerns itself not only with ontological questions (e.g., whether a text really exists) but also with epistemological issues (e.g., how we know or ways of knowing). When we ask, then, if literature's chief function is to entertain or to teach, we are really asking epistemological questions. Whether we read a text to learn from it or to be entertained, we can say that once we have read a text, we "know" that text. *How do you know?*

We can know a text, however, in two distinct ways. The first way involves the typical literature classroom analysis. When we have studied, analyzed, and critiqued a text and have arrived at an interpretation, we can then confidently assert that we know the text. On the other hand, when we stay up all night turning the pages of a P. D. James mystery novel to discover who the murderer is, we can also say that we know the text because we have spent time devouring its pages, lost in its secondary world, consumed by its characters, and by novel's end eagerly seeking the resolution of its tensions. Both methods—one with its chief goal to learn, the other to entertain—involve similar yet distinct epistemological endpoints: to know a text, but in two different ways.

The French verbs *savoir* and *connaître* can both be translated "to know" and can highlight for us the difference between these two epistemological goals or ways of knowing a text. *Savoir* means "to analyze" (from the Greek *analuein*, "to undo") and "to study." The word is used to refer to knowing something that is the object of study and assumes that the object, such as a text, can be examined, analyzed, and critiqued. (Knowledge or learning about is the ultimate goal.)

*Connaître*, on the other hand, implies that we intimately know or have experienced the text. *Connaître* is used for knowing people and refers also to knowing an author's canon. Both knowing persons and knowing all a writer's works imply intimacy, learning the particular qualities of one person or author, the ins and outs of each. Indeed, it is this intimacy that one often experiences while reading a mystery novel all night long. It is knowing or knowledge of that the word means. (?) *transl. pub. 1961*

To know how to analyze a text, to discuss its literary elements, and to apply the various methodologies of literary criticism means that we know that text (*savoir*). To have experienced the text—to have cried along with or about its characters, to have lost time and sleep immersed in the secondary world it creates, and to have felt our emotions stirred by the text—also means that we know that text (*connaître*). From one way of knowing, we

learn facts or information; from the other, we encounter and participate in an intimate experience.

At times, we have actually known the text from both these perspectives. While analyzing and critiquing a text (*savoir*), we have often (and perhaps more often than not) simultaneously experienced it, becoming emotionally involved with its characters' choices and destinies (*connaître*) and imagining ourselves to be these characters or at least recognizing some of our own characteristics dramatized by the characters.

To say that we know a text is no simple statement. Underlying our private and public reactions and our scholarly critiques and analyses is our literary theory, the fountainhead of our most intimate and our most public declarations. The formal study of literary theory, therefore, enables us to explain our responses to any text and allows us to articulate the function of literature in an academic and a personal way.

## BEGINNING THE FORMAL STUDY OF LITERARY THEORY

This chapter has stressed the importance of literary theory and criticism and its relationship to literature and the interpretative processes. It has also articulated the underlying premises of why a study of literary theory is essential:

- Literary theory assumes that there is no such thing as an innocent reading of a text. Whether our responses are emotional and spontaneous or well reasoned and highly structured, all such interactions with and about a text are based on underlying factors that cause us to respond to that text in a particular fashion. What elicits these responses or how a reader makes sense of a text is at the heart of literary theory.
- Because our reactions to any text have theoretical bases, all readers must have a literary theory. The methods we use to frame our personal interpretations of any text directly involve us in the process of literary criticism and theory, automatically making us practicing literary critics.
- Many readers have a literary theory that is more often than not unconscious, incomplete, ill informed, and eclectic; therefore, readers' interpretations can easily be illogical, unsound, and haphazard. A well-defined, logical, and clearly articulated literary theory consciously and purposefully enables readers to develop their own methods of interpretation, permitting them to order, clarify, and justify their appraisals of a text in a consistent and logical manner.
- Today many critics use the terms *literary criticism* and *literary theory* interchangeably. Still others use the terms *literary theory* and *Continental philosophy* synonymously. Although the semantic boundaries between literary criticism and literary theory (and sometimes Continental philosophy) are a bit blurred, literary criticism assumes that literary theory exists and that literary criticism rests on literary theory's concepts, ideas, and ever-developing principles.

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It is the goal of this text to enable readers to make such conscious, informed, and intelligent choices, and in doing so, refine their own methods of literary interpretation and more precisely understand their personal and public reactions to texts. To accomplish this goal, this text will introduce readers to literary theory and criticism, its historical development, and the various theoretical positions or schools of criticism, enabling readers to become knowledgeable critics of their own and others' interpretations. By becoming acquainted with diverse and often contradictory approaches to textual analysis, readers will broaden their perspectives not only about themselves but also about others and the world in which they live.

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# A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF LITERARY CRITICISM

*No poet, no artist, has his [or her] complete meaning alone.*

T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

*of course*

## INTRODUCTION

Questions about the value, the structure, and the definition of literature undoubtedly arose in all cultures as people heard or read works of art. Such practical criticism probably began with the initial hearing or reading of the first literary works. The Greeks of the fifth century BCE were the first, however, to articulate and develop the philosophy of art and life that serves as the foundation for most theoretical and practical criticism. Assuredly, hearers and performers of the Homeric poems commented on and interpreted these works before the fifth century BCE, but it was the fifth-century Athenians who questioned the very act of reading and writing itself while pondering the purpose of literature. Some scholars date the origin of literary criticism by citing the performance of Aristophanes' play, *The Frogs* in 405 BCE. The play was performed as a part of a contest among dramatists, with Aristophanes receiving first prize. To win the contest, a literary judge or judges had to declare *The Frogs* the "best" play, thus initiating literary criticism. By so doing, these early critics began a debate about the nature and function of literature that continues to the present day. What they inaugurated was the formal study of literary criticism.

From the fifth century BCE to the present, numerous critics—such as Plato, Dante Alighieri, William Wordsworth, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, Louise Rosenblatt, Stephen Greenblatt, Judith Butler, Lawrence Buell, and a host of others, have developed principles of criticism that have had a major influence on the continuing discussion of literary criticism. By examining these critics' ideas, we can gain an understanding of and participate