

## Why Do You Need This New Edition?

If you're wondering why you should buy the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of *Texts and Contexts*, here are five great reasons!

- 1 Expanded Film Discussion.** Film is given more focused attention to demonstrate how critical theory can be applied to the vastly popular subject of cinema studies.
- 2 New Practice Texts & Questions.** Additional questions and four new sample texts provide an opportunity to improve analytical skills following each theory chapter.
- 3 Updated Source and Recommended Readings.** Updated source information and carefully selected further readings in areas such as post colonialism, queer theory, feminist theory, and African American studies provide new resources.
- 4 New Terms & Checklists.** End-of-chapter reviews are bookmarked with a list of handy terms and a three step "how-to" checklist that help enhance understanding of a particular theory.
- 5 Additional Appendix.** This new appendix demonstrates how critical theories relate to and differ from one another.

PEARSON  
Longman

# TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

Writing About Literature  
with Critical Theory

---

Sixth Edition

STEVEN LYNN

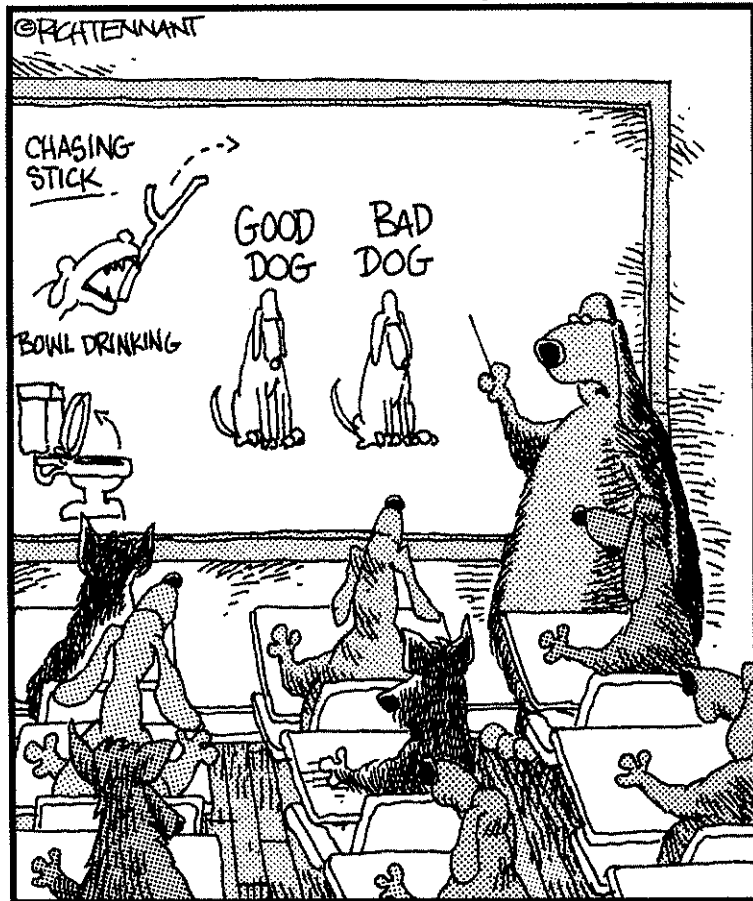
University of South Carolina

Longman

Boston Columbus Indianapolis New York San Francisco Upper Saddle River  
Amsterdam Cape Town Dubai London Madrid Milan Munich Paris Montreal Toronto  
Delhi Mexico City Sao Paulo Sydney Hong Kong Seoul Singapore Taipei Tokyo

# The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Okay, let's get into something a little more theoretical."

© The 5th Wave, www.the5thwave.com

## CHAPTER

# An Introduction, Theoretically

*We should study literary criticism and the theories of literature for the same reasons we read literature—to forever alter our perspectives, to escape our own vanities, and to extend the horizons of our limitations.*

—Lynn Jordan Stidon  
(from her Final Exam in English 102)

### TEXTUAL TOURS

Why should we read literature? Why should we study different ways of reading? I love Lynn Jordan Stidon's answer to these questions (see the epigraph above), which really did appear in her final exam. Her answer would seem to apply as well to watching movies, looking at paintings, attending plays or concerts, and any number of other personally enriching endeavors. Her justification—"to forever alter our perspectives, to escape our own vanities, and to extend the horizons of our limitations"—sounds much like the reasons we give for travel. We want to have fun, to learn things, and to be able to talk about it later.

Literary works are, in a way, like places we can visit. Some are foreign, mysterious, puzzling; others make us feel right at home. Some call us back again and again; others we feel obliged to experience, knowing they'll do us good even though we never quite enjoy them. Inhabiting a literary work, we can see how other people live; we can see,

to a certain extent, through other people's eyes. We can momentarily transcend the boundaries of our lives. And we ought to write about literature and other cultural experiences for some of the same reasons that we like to write and think about where we've been. Indeed, we send postcards and letters back home, we make pictures and even movies (for sometimes captive audiences), in part because we want to share our experiences with others, but also because we want to reconsider and ponder and make sense of our travels for ourselves. Life is the journey, it's often said, but reflecting on where you've been can be the most meaningful part of travel. Our understanding and appreciation of a literary work are likewise often enhanced by our efforts to say something about it. Sometimes the insights are huge; sometimes they seem insignificant; sometimes they move from one category to the other.

Although wandering around is always an option, travelers who know what they're looking for and have a plan for getting there are often more likely to have satisfying interesting visits. Literary criticism aims to bring such order and organization to our experience of literary works, focusing our attention on this, disregarding that, putting various parts together, helping us make sense of what we see. When you write about literature, you serve as a kind of tour guide, leading your reader (and yourself) through the work. Readers usually can see what's in front of them, but they don't necessarily know what to make of it without some persuasive commentary. Plus, different readers have different interests, different backgrounds, and they necessarily bring different insights and desires to a work. Some travelers, with lots of experience, keen eyes, and fertile imaginations, may tend to provide especially wonderful guides and reports, but even inexperienced travelers may come upon marvels, and notice things that no one else has seen in quite the same way. Even if you are an unseasoned traveler in the literary world, you just can't substitute someone else's experience for your own: Don't believe that anyone's "Notes," whether by Clifford or Sparkie or your best friend, will expand your horizons or deepen your awareness in the same way as a firsthand encounter. This is not to say that we all cannot benefit from the advice and guidance of genuine experts, of scholars who publish in academic journals and with university presses. Your teachers and reference librarians can help you locate this kind of reliable and helpful commentary. But you have to see for yourself first and foremost. (oh, oh)

Critical theories are like the different travel agencies through which the various tour guides generally work. Different agencies

feature different kinds of tours, just as different theories generate different kinds of readings: one specializes in cultural immersion, another in artistic appreciation, another in historical recollection, another in personal indulgence. The agencies provide the frameworks, the general guidelines for the performances of the tour guides. "The Museums of London," "Shakespeare's London," and "The Pubs of London" are all tours of the same city, but they start from very different assumptions about what the travelers are there for. A theory is a set of assumptions, a context for assigning value, making meaning, and guiding behavior. If you are familiar with a variety of theories, then you're able to draw upon a wider range of assumptions and strategies as a reader; you're better able to see how other readers are motivated. If an assignment asks you to focus on the formal features of a literary work, you're less likely, given some familiarity with various critical theories, to concentrate on how the work affects you personally, or on how it reflects its author's psychological state, or its racial and ethnic implications.

Just as no one who is living in any significant sense can avoid having a personality, it is impossible to read (meaningfully) without some theoretical orientation. Even the belief that one should just experience a text without saying anything about it, without any self-consciousness, without considering one's own purposes or suppositions, without exploring other ways of reading—even this effort, to evade a theoretical stance is itself theoretical. It stands to reason, then, that some understanding of the kinds of tours available, and how they might be combined or adapted, will be valuable and reassuring. The goal of this book is to give you a working understanding of a variety of critical theories and practices. You won't find every theory covered here, and I freely affirm that many complexities and controversies and ambiguities have been overlooked here. This is after all an introduction, a starting point, for people who have some familiarity with required literary study, but who aren't familiar with different strategies for talking and writing about literature. If you've ever read a literary work, or a writing assignment in a literature class, and wondered "now what?"—then this is the book for you.

## CHECKING SOME BAGGAGE

Before we begin, let's consider some basic questions often asked by embarking students, and then address a bit more directly the purpose and plan of this book.

## “Is there one correct interpretation of a literary work?”

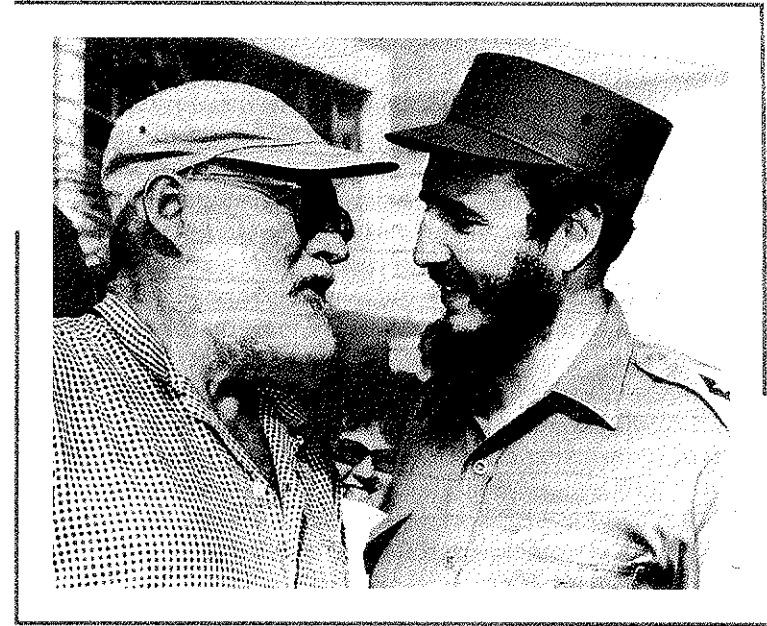
Perhaps there are English teachers somewhere like the one in John Cheever’s “Expelled,” who tells students that her interpretation of *Hamlet* is the only one they need to know—it’s “the one accepted on college-board papers,” she says. But most teachers (and certainly your own if this book has been assigned) cherish variety and difference in literary criticism, encouraging students to think for themselves when they write about literature. Just as there is no one best place to view the Blue Ridge Mountains, so there is no one best reading of *Hamlet* or any work (although it might be fun to argue about such things). Shift your vantage point a little, change your interests, or just let some time pass, and you’ll see something new.

## “So, are all opinions about literature equally valid?”

Still, surely some opinions seem more convincing or satisfying than others. Endorsing variety doesn’t necessarily mean that all opinions are equal, that any piece of literary criticism is just as good as any other. Just because we appreciate various views of the mountains, we need not also agree that all vantage points are equally satisfying to all people. If you construct a reading of *Hamlet* this week and a different interpretation next week, it’s unlikely that you or your readers will value both of them equally or even that everyone will agree on which one is superior. Some readings are arguably better than others, but to make such a determination, we need first to ask: better for what? Better for whom? This book aims to address such questions, attempting not only to explain clearly and explicitly how to use various critical approaches but also to assess what purposes different approaches are likely to serve (better for what), as well as what sort of audience is likely to be influenced and even created by different critical strategies (better for whom).

Consider, for instance, the photograph on the following page: What does it mean?

- Are these men standing so close together because they’re close friends? Are they from some other culture, in which men stand this close? Are they in fact standing unusually close, or am I revealing something about myself in asking this question?
- Are they father and son, perhaps—genetically disposed to superior beards? Is that the wife/mother in between and behind them? What is the expression on her face?



© AP Images

- Are they trying to kiss, and laughing because their caps are getting in the way? The younger man’s attire does have sort of a Village People look. Is it possible these men are gay?
- Are they perhaps actors or politicians? Don’t they seem a little too jovial? Is this scene staged or real?
- Is it possible these men never actually met? Perhaps the picture has an air of unreality about it because it is a computer-generated fake? Perhaps these are wax models?

Some of these suggestions no doubt seem to you less plausible than others, but it would be very difficult to exclude totally even the wackiest of readings on the basis of the picture alone, wouldn’t it?

If the meaning here is limited only by the creativity of the interpreter (and perhaps by the receptivity of anyone the interpreter wants to persuade), then what happens when we bring a context to the work—when we put the picture in a frame, in a sense? This famous photograph, taken in 1960, captures Ernest Hemingway, the legendary American writer (on the left), talking with Fidel Castro, Cuba’s equally legendary dictator. Now that we have a historical context, do we know any more about what the picture means? Perhaps. But in terms of Hemingway’s life, the photo still might mean any number of things. Since Hemingway took his own life in 1961, reportedly in

despair after extended illness, the "meaning" of the picture for some viewers might be what it suggests about Hemingway's health in 1960. Do we see hints that Hemingway is not well? (I don't; he appears virile and vigorous, although there is other evidence that his physical and mental health was failing at this time.) For *Castro's* biography, the photo would have quite different meanings. And in a history of Cuban-American relations, the photo would likely have other meanings.

In fact, although this picture has appeared in many contexts, one of the more interesting surely occurred in *Newsweek* in September 1994, illustrating an article on the Clinton Administration's Cuban policies. What, one might wonder, does the great American writer meeting with the notorious Cuban leader in 1960 have to do with foreign policy in the 1990s? The picture is captioned "Tangled up in Myths: Hemingway with the Cuban leader in 1960" (26), and Michael Elliott's accompanying article argues that U.S. attitudes toward Cuba are clouded by fantasies and misperceptions. To understand the picture in the context of Elliott's essay, one must not only have some familiarity with Hemingway and Castro, but also realize that Hemingway lived in Cuba a substantial part of his life, fishing, drinking, entertaining buddies. When we think of Cuba, Elliott writes, we think of "romance, casinos, and martinis" (27). "From Teddy Roosevelt to Jimmy Buffett, with contributions from Ernest Hemingway . . . and the U.S. officers who first mixed rum and Coke to form a *cuba libre*," Elliott says, Americans have formed an unrealistic vision of Cuba, thinking of it as a country that naturally ought to be an extension of the United States—our playground, our tropical resort.

Thus, the picture's meaning within the context of Elliott's essay would seem to be pretty clear: it's an allusion to "Hemingway's Cuba," as we have imagined it, versus the real Cuba, as Castro has controlled and strangled it. But there is always more that can be said if we look again, more closely, if we reconsider the context, thinking from a different perspective. The picture might be seen in larger symbolic terms, for instance: Why not think of Hemingway as standing, in a sense, for America, and Castro, in the same way, for Cuba? In this sense, Hemingway the brilliant writer, able to express his dreams and desires, embodies the openness, creativity, and accomplishment of the United States. His casual shirt and comfortable cap contrast sharply with Castro's rigid hat and stiffly starched shirt—just as the freedom and comfort of America contrast sharply with the oppressive, impoverished regime of communist Cuba. Castro's military-style costume lacks decoration or insignia, as if he wants to promote the misleading notion that he is an ordinary man, one of the common people. The truly common people in Castro's Cuba are

represented by the woman in the background, frowning as she is being squeezed out of the picture, ignored by her communist dictator. Even the background of the picture reinforces this reading, with lush vegetation and windows behind Hemingway, and a blankness behind Castro.

However "correct" (or "incorrect") this symbolic interpretation might seem, it does not exhaust the photograph's potential meaning. In fact, from the point of view of a Cuban revolutionary loyal to Castro, a contrasting reading emerges. Employing that context, one might see Hemingway as a symbol of America's moral and social bankruptcy. Despite the appearance of health, America, like Hemingway, is headed toward its inevitable self-annihilation. Years of self-indulgence will take their toll. Compare the vigor and strength of Castro. Rather than a rumpled shirt, not even entirely buttoned, Castro is wearing a crisp shirt, a smart hat, reflecting the discipline of his people. And our imaginary Castro communist might smugly look back and reflect that just as Castro has outlasted Hemingway by many years, so will Cuba be thriving long after the United States has destroyed itself. The point I'm emphasizing here is that our understanding of a "text" is shaped by the context in which we see it. If this insight isn't surprising to you, its implications are nonetheless profound—and often overlooked. Although a picture sometimes might, as we say, be worth a thousand words, even a picture can be read in many different ways, including opposing ways. When we think about how to take, or create, the meaning of anything—a poem, a story, a photograph, a life—we cannot avoid this interplay of texts and contexts. This territory, in which we think explicitly about how meaning is made, is called critical theory.

The modifier "critical" in this context doesn't mean theory that is "inclined to find fault or judge severely"—just as "literary criticism" is not devoted to making harsh or negative judgments. "Critical" also means "involving skillful judgment" and "of essential importance" (Webster's definitions). Critical theory is thus concerned with those ideas that are essential to the process of making skillful judgments about literature.

## ANYTHING TO DECLARE?

### Theory enables practice.

The focus in this text on the assumptions, strategies, and purposes shaping literary criticism—on critical theories in other words—is not a step away from literature or writing about literature; rather, such

assumptions, strategies, and purposes make a deeply rewarding engagement with literature possible. Even the simplest acts of literary response, such as "This is boring," depend on a certain theoretical stance. In this case, the stance includes the assumption that the purpose of literature includes entertaining the reader and that the critic's job includes identifying works that fail this test.

### You already have a theoretical stance.

Even if you're unaware of them, some kind of principles guide you in determining what you expect a literary work to do, how you evaluate its performance, what you decide to say about it. (Even the absence of principles constitutes a theoretical position, as does the presence of contradictory principles.) The "elements" of literature, such as plot, character, point of view, are easy to understand, and most students have been through these terms and concepts many times, often without noticing much help from them in interpreting literature. What is harder, and where more guidance is needed, is in knowing what to say about such elements—how to approach them and how to use them. In the following explanations and illustrations of the various critical approaches, you'll get to see the "elements" in action. You'll see, for instance, how New Criticism, psychological criticism, and deconstruction provide very different views of "character," or "plot," or "theme," giving you a wider range of purposes and strategies in writing about literature.

To begin enhancing your awareness of literary criticism, take an inventory of what you already assume, asking yourself the following questions:

- What do I suppose is the function of literature? What do I look for in a literary work?
- What do I think is the function of writing about literature? What should literary criticism do?
- How do I believe the task of criticism is carried out? What strategies, routines, procedures, and activities do literary critics engage in?

As you try out the various approaches discussed here, you'll be able to compare your own starting assumptions with some of the various options available. At the least, you'll have a better understanding of the critical possibilities, allowing you to understand published criticism more readily; more likely, you'll find yourself incorporating

new strategies or stances into your writing about literature, enriching and deepening your insights.

### This is an introduction

Such theoretical work is challenging at times, but it isn't beyond your abilities. There are, to be sure, many controversies, variations, complexities, exceptions, and qualifications that are not treated here. Critical theory can be astonishingly difficult (and often just astonishing). After working through this book, you may find the work of Jacques Derrida or Annette Kolodny more accessible, but they certainly won't be easy to understand—just as an introduction to physics wouldn't make the scientific papers of Steven Hawking or John Wheeler a breeze to comprehend. But there's no reason you shouldn't be told about black holes or deconstruction simply because the theories, in all their specifics and intricacies, are difficult. Few people, if pressed, could read Isaac Newton's monumental works with complete understanding, but just about anyone can understand in a useful way how momentum and gravity work.

This text offers a basic, working understanding of critical theory and practice, freely acknowledging that a more advanced understanding is possible. I have tried hard to clarify without distorting, but some matters have no doubt been represented to be simpler than they are.

### Here's the plan

Unfortunately, there's no way a reasonably sized textbook (one without wheels and a handle) can cover adequately all the different kinds of criticism that can be identified today—even if I understood them all. Nor can any one particular theory in all its mutations, combinations, and complexities be presented here. What I can do is provide a practical introduction to some of the most influential theories, leaving aside for now, and with considerable regret, some of the most interesting and exciting. My goal is to put you in a position to develop and refine your understanding, to move into other critical arenas, to evolve your own readings and even theories.

The plan is simple. The second chapter briefly visits all the approaches discussed here by applying them to a single passage. Then, each of the next six chapters inhabits a theory or a cluster of related theories in some detail, again applying the theory or theories to various passages and evolving essays step by step from each of the various critical stances. At the end of each chapter, you'll find a

very select list of suggested further readings. I've annotated these items to give you a better sense of what's out there and where you might want to go from here.

### Recommended Further Reading: Introductions and Overviews

- Adler, Mortimer, and Charles Van Doren. *How to Read a Book*. New York: Simon, 1972. Print. Originally published in 1940, this book still offers valuable advice on "How to Be a Demanding Reader," "How to Use a Dictionary," and much else. Chapter 15 deals with "Suggestions for Reading Stories, Plays, and Poems."
- Bloom, Harold. *How to Read and Why*. New York: Simon, 2000. Print. Offers dozens of dazzling examples of careful and imaginative reading, proceeding from the assumption that by reading great literature we "strengthen the self."
- \* Bressler, Charles. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practices*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice, 2003. Print. A thorough overview including a valuable historical survey.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. Print. Sophisticated yet extremely lucid.
- Denby, David. *Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World*. New York: Simon, 1996. Print. An inspiring book for anyone embarking on serious literary studies: Denby, a movie critic, tells the story of his decision at age 48 to return to Columbia University and read great literature.
- Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read a Poem*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. Print. "Like thatching or clog dancing," Eagleton says, "literary criticism seems to be something of a dying art." This book delightfully illustrates how to revive it.
- Harmon, William, and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. 11th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice, 2008. Print. If you want to know what the "Spasmodic School" was, or what a Spoonerism is, or the meaning of just about any other word related to literature, here's a handy place to look. There are many good handbooks, but this one is especially lucid and thorough.
- Hirsch, Edward. *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, 2000. Print. As the title suggests, this is a book about the joy, the pleasure, the "ecstatic response" even that constitutes perceptive and committed reading.
- Lentricchia, Frank, and Thomas McLaughlin. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. Print. Somewhat challenging but richly rewarding essays by leading scholars on various topics: "Representation," "Structure," "Writing," "Narrative," and so forth.

Trimble, John. *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice, 2000. Print. The best little book on writing I know. Many times I've assigned the first chapter to first-year English students, and they show up for the next class having read the whole book. If you're at all weak as a writer, or if you just want to get stronger, get this book. It's lively, fun, useful, and the examples are mostly drawn from writing about literature.