# Literary Criticism

## An Introduction to Theory and Practice

Second Edition

Charles E. Bressler

# *LITERARY CRITICISM*

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*Second Edition*



Charles E. Bressler

*Houghton College*

Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Bressler, Charles E.
Literary criticism : an introduction to theory and practice /
Charles E. Bressler. — 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-13-897422-5
1. Criticism. I. Title.
PN81.B666 1998
801'.95—dc21 98-33496
CIP

***For Darlene, my best friend and loving wife,***
***and***
***For Heidi, my beloved daughter***

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*Acknowledgments appear on page 301, which constitutes a continuation of the copyright page.*

This book was set in 10/12 Palatino by DM Cradle Associates
and was printed and bound by Courier Companies, Inc.
The cover was printed by Phoenix Color Corp.


Simon & Schuster/A Viacom Company
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458



Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-13-897422-5

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*
Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*
Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., *Toronto*
Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S.A., *Mexico*
Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*
Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*
Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*
Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

# *Foreword*

Dr. Johnson's character Imlac explains that "To talk in publick, to think in solitude, to read and to hear, to inquire, and to answer inquiries" is the business of a scholar. At some point, as Imlac suggests, our ideas are brought out for review by those in other parts of society. In the process, as we interact with others, we participate in the essential human work of allowing them to help shape the way we think. This interaction admits us to experiences other than our own. It admits us beyond the boundaries of our communities. Developments in literary and cultural theory are intended to help students and teachers explore divergent critical approaches to literary works to expand, not diminish, discussion. Yet many teachers have questioned whether theory has had any positive effect on the quality and depth of classroom practice and discussion.

As we approach the twenty-first century, few would disagree that we have witnessed a proliferation of theory, such as cultural studies, women's studies, interdisciplinary studies, American studies, semiotics, and deconstruction, to name a few. Barbara Christian suggests that this proliferation of theory is more accurately a "race for theory" in which "critics are no longer concerned with literature, but with other critics' texts, for the critic yearning for attention has displaced the writer and has conceived of himself as the center." Many critics are describing these developments in theory as the basis for much needed change in institutional and pedagogical practice. Other critics, hostile to theory and radical curricular change, argue that theoretical changes have resulted in too much division and unnecessary conflict. Terry Eagleton notes, however, that such "hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own." Eagleton's point is well taken. There is a particular danger in the totalizing effects of one or two dominant, unchecked opinions in any situation, in the classroom in particular, where theory needs and finds nourishment in discussion and debate, and in meaningful conversation, an old art that needs to be preserved. Gerald Graff has argued that we need to engage students in the conversation about literary study. In *Beyond Culture Wars*, he contends that "It is not the conflicts dividing the university that should worry us but the fact that students are not playing a more active role in them." Graff rightly points out that the literature classroom is an appropriate forum for students to address these conflicts in relation to classroom practice.

*Literary Criticism* invites students to the ongoing debate about the place of theory and practice in the literature classroom. Charles Bressler has written this book with a developed awareness that, while teachers within and between departments battle for viable approaches to the study of literature and the humanities, students are too often excluded from any number of important critical discussions that most frequently and immediately affect them. Well researched and lucidly written, this book helps students develop and articulate their interpretations from a variety of theoretical approaches by equipping them with the critical tools for reading.

Chapter 1 addresses two of the most prevalent questions in the college literature classroom: What is literature and why do we read it? Obvious questions to many, with obvious answers for some, these two questions in particular reflect the legitimate concern of students that literary study has relevance only in the classroom. Often students feel that developing critical approaches to literary works remains somehow the tired work of academicians, not the work of real citizens. Bressler's discussion addresses this concern, not only providing a working definition of literature, including its epistemological and ontological components, but relating literary study to broader, underlying cultural concerns. Such a discussion provides students a starting point to develop their own definition of literature and criticism, while also providing them an opportunity to discuss their definitions with other students who hold different views.

Chapter 2 traces the historical developments of literary criticism from Plato to the present. This chapter is designed to help students think about how their ideas stand in relation to and participate in the historical debate about such important critical concerns as representation, truth, beauty, nature, form, meaning, gender, class, audience, among others. First, Chapter 2 traces some of the important early influences on what is now modern literary theory so that students can compare the current direction of theory to the bearings of the past. Second, the discussion of historical developments alerts students to the intellectual risks associated with developing a completely contemporary diet of ideas.

Chapters 3 through 11 investigate individually the main critical concerns, or "schools," that have developed in the twentieth-century. This second edition of *Literary Criticism*, in addition to including the now old New Criticism, and including Reader Response Criticism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Feminism, Marxism, and New Historicism, has added a chapter on Cultural Studies, Chapter 11. Specifically, Chapter 11 explores the developing trends in Post-colonial, Gender, and African-American studies.

*Literary Criticism* equips teachers and students to enter into a more meaningful conversation about literary texts. In this new edition, new professional essays follow new student essays at the end of each chapter. In addition, a list of useful web sites and links follow the discussion of each

school of criticism beginning with Chapter 3. These Internet listings provide students new and exciting avenues of exploration for each school of criticism. This new design reinforces Bressler's commitment to encouraging students to think of themselves as theorists and critics who play a vital role in literary studies. To enable students to become informed, critical readers, this new edition has also included a Question section at the end of each chapter. This section emphasizes that asking informed questions is most typically the best starting point for conducting literary research and writing effective criticism. Just as importantly, these questions are designed to help students develop their opinion and voice in sometimes vast and impersonal institutional and cultural settings.

It is not the goal of this book to substitute for any important primary readings. Instead, this text intends to engage students in a series of important mutual introductions to primary and secondary works in literary history. It is hoped that students then will decide how reading stands in relation to their own lives inside and outside their own communities. Whatever they decide, they may find that in learning how to be informed readers and thinkers, they are also learning how to be responsible citizens.

*Daniel H. Strait*
*Asbury College*

# *To the Reader*

Like the first edition, this new edition of *Literary Criticism* is designed as a supplemental text for introductory courses in both literature and literary criticism. Its purpose is to enable students to approach literature from a variety of practical and theoretical positions and to equip them with a theoretical and a practical understanding of how critics develop and articulate interpretations. Its aim, then, is to take the mystery out of working with and interpreting texts.

Like the first edition, this new text holds to several key premises. First, it assumes that there is no such thing as an innocent reading of a text. Whether our responses to a text are emotional and spontaneous or well-reasoned and highly structured, all such interactions are based upon some underlying factors that cause us to respond in a particular fashion. What elicits these responses and how a reader makes sense out of a text is what really matters. And it is the domain of literary theory to question our initial and final responses, our beliefs, our feelings, and our overall interpretation. To understand why we respond to a text in a certain way, we must first understand literary theory and criticism.

Second, since our responses to a text have theoretical bases, I presume that all readers have a literary theory. Consciously or unconsciously, we as readers have developed a mind-set concerning our expectations when reading any text, be it a novel, a short story, a poem, or any other type of literature. Somehow, as the critic Jonathan Culler maintains, we make sense out of printed material. The methods we use to frame our personal interpretations of any text involve us in the process of literary criticism and theory, and automatically make us practicing literary critics whether we know it or not.

My third assumption rests on the observation that each reader's literary theory and accompanying methodology is either conscious or unconscious, complete or incomplete, informed or ill-informed, eclectic or unified. Since an unconscious, incomplete, ill-informed, and eclectic literary theory more frequently than not leads to illogical, unsound, and haphazard interpretations, I believe that a well-defined, logical, and clearly articulated theory will enable readers to develop their own methods of interpretation, permitting them to order, clarify, and justify their personal appraisals of any text in a consistent and rational manner.

Unfortunately, many readers cannot articulate their own literary theory and have little knowledge of the history and development of the ever-evolving principles of literary criticism. It is the goal of this book to introduce students and other readers to literary theory and criticism, its historical

development, and the various theoretical positions or schools of criticism that will enable them as readers to make conscious, informed, and intelligent choices concerning their own methods of interpretation.

Like the first edition, this new edition introduces students to the basic concerns of literary theory and criticism in Chapter 1, but now includes an expanded definition of literature itself. Chapter 2 is also expanded and places literary theory and criticism in historical perspective, starting with Plato and ending with modern-day theorists such as Stephen Greenblatt. Chapters 3 to 11 discuss the eleven major schools of criticism that have developed in the twentieth century: New Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Feminism, Marxism, Cultural Poetics or New Historicism, and new to the second edition, Post-Colonialism, African-American Criticism, and Gender Studies. To maintain consistency and for ease of study, each of these chapters is identically organized. We begin with a brief **Introduction** followed by the **Historical Development** of each school of criticism. Next is the **Assumptions** section that sets forth the philosophical principles upon which each school of criticism is based. The **Methodology** section follows and serves as a "how to" manual for explaining the techniques used by the various schools of criticism to formulate their interpretations of a text based upon their philosophical assumptions. Readers of the first edition will note that in this new edition each of these sections is greatly expanded and includes a more complete discussion of the varying positions held by literary critics within each school of criticism. Throughout each of the aforementioned sections, all key terms are in boldface type, making them easily found and accessible to the reader.

After the Methodology section, this new edition includes a **Questions for Analysis** section in Chapters 3 through 10. This section provides students with key questions to ask of a text in order to view that text from the perspective of the school of criticism being discussed. Some of these questions also ask students to apply their new-found knowledge to a particular text or texts. After this section come the **Sample Essays**. As in the first edition, undergraduate **student essays** appear in which students apply the principles and methods of interpretation of the school of criticism under discussion to one of six primary texts that can be easily found in literary anthologies. These primary texts include John Keats's "To Autumn," Edgar Allan Poe's "The City in the Sea," Margaret Atwood's "Spelling," Tony Harrison's "Marked with a D.," Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." A new addition to this edition is the appearance of outstanding **professional essays** authored by many of the leading scholars of literary theory and criticism. Following the student selections, these professional essays provide a variety of concrete models that readers can emulate to enhance their own theoretical and practical understanding of literary criticism "in action."

After the Sample Essays section, a newly-revised **Further Reading** section follows. Updated and more comprehensive than in the first edition, these

selected references complement the more comprehensive and up-to-date **Bibliography** found at the end of the text. After the Further Reading section appears a new section entitled **Internet Sites** that provides many more avenues of exploration for each of the schools of criticism under discussion. Often these World Wide Web addresses include links to many other sites that provide opportunities to venture into the ever-expanding world of literary theory.

Since this new edition is an introductory text, the explanations of the various schools of criticism should not be viewed as exhaustive, but as a first step toward an understanding of some rather difficult concepts, principles, and methodologies. After reading each chapter, it is hoped that readers will continue their own investigations of literary theory and criticism by exploring advanced theoretical texts and the primary works of both theoretical and practical critics.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Like all artistic endeavors, the creation of a text involves the author's relationships with a variety of people. This text is no exception. To the members of my literary criticism classes who heard many parts of this text in lecture form and who continue to inspire me to explore more fully the depths and heights of both critical scholarship and my own personal hermeneutics, I say thank you. Without you, this book would not have been written. I am particularly grateful to Krista Adlhock, Dale Schuurman, Jen Richardson, David Johnson, Kara Roggie, and Juanita Wolfe, the authors of the newly generated student essays that appear in this edition. To Houghton College, for granting me another sabbatical that allowed the time to study, research, and write, I again express my appreciation. Thanks are also due to my colleagues and friends in the Department of English and Communication at Houghton College. Their kind advice and their constant encouragement have been greatly appreciated. In particular, I wish to thank our department secretary, Jane Miner, for her faithful and careful editing and typing of various sections of this manuscript. I also wish to thank Diva Daims, SUNY at Albany and James Heldman, Western Kentucky University. To Carrie Brandon, I am grateful for the superb editing and professional advice. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Daniel Strait for his keen insights, editorial comments, and constant affirmation. Most of all, I wish to express my love and appreciation to my wife, Darlene, and to my daughter, Heidi, for their editorial comments and for freeing me from many of life's daily chores and demands so that I could study, research, and write. Without their support and love this text would not exist. Because of the input of my friends and family, this is a better work. Any mistakes, errors in judgment, or other flaws, however, must be attributed to me alone.

*Charles E. Bressler*

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# 1

# *Defining Criticism, Theory, and Literature*

## EAVESDROPPING ON A LITERATURE CLASSROOM

Having assigned his 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, Professor George Blackwell could not anticipate whether his students would greet him with silence, bewilderment, or frustration when asked to discuss this work. His curiosity would soon be satisfied, for as he stood before the class, he 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 suddenly found the covers of their anthologies fascinating, others shot up their hands. Given a nod from Professor Blackwell, 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, for example, 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 to choose their 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 philosophy or religion into the story," said George. "Through 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, a bit dark itself. 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 about an academic or pie-in-the-sky, meaningless philosophical discussion, but a lot to do about being a woman. Being raised in the South, O'Connor would know and would have experienced prejudice because she is a woman. And as we all know, Southern males' opinion of women is that they are to be barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen. Seemingly, they are 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 nondescript could O'Connor be? O'Connor's message, then, 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 discussed countless times before: appearance versus reality. This is O'Connor's main point. The grandmother acts like a lady—someone who cares greatly about others—but inwardly she cares only for herself. She's a hypocrite."

"I disagree. In fact, I disagree with everybody," announced 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. Blackwell, 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 titled "What 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' Really Means." And since she never tells us its meaning, can't the story have more than one meaning?"

Professor Blackwell 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 Professor Blackwell'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 simply wrong? If so, how does one arrive at the correct interpretation? Put another way, if there is only one correct interpretation of a text, what are the **hermeneutical principles** readers must use to discover this interpretation?

On the other hand, if a work can have multiple interpretations, are all such interpretations valid? Can and should each interpretation be considered a satisfactory and legitimate analysis of the text under discussion? 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 and legitimate interpretation?

Or need a reader be thinking of any of these particulars when reading a text? Can't one simply enjoy a novel, for example, without considering its interpretation? Need one be able to state the work's theme, discuss its structure, or analyze its tone in order to enjoy the act of reading the novel 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 appears daunting and formidable. Jargon such as **hermeneutics**, **Aristotelian poetics, deconstruction**, and a host of other intimidating terms confront the would-be **literary critic**. But 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 Professor Blackwell'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 their liking of the grandmother, but others thought she was 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 the teachings of Jesus Christ as the basis 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 story.

When Dr. Blackwell's students stated their personal interpretations of O'Connor's story, they had already 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 language of literary theory. And none were acquainted with any of the formal schools of literary criticism.

What each student had done was to 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. These responses coupled with the text itself are the concerns of formal literary criticism.

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 theory. By mastering the concepts of formal literary criticism, these students, like all readers, can become critical readers who are better able to understand and articulate their own reactions and those of others to any 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.

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 that we can knowingly explore the questions that help define our humanity, evaluate our actions, or simply increase our appreciation and enjoyment of both a literary work and our fellow human beings.