LITERARY CRITICISM

An Introduction to Theory and Practice

Charles E. Bressler

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For my best friend and loving wife,
Darlene

To the Instructor

Literary Criticism is designed as a supplemental text for introductory literature courses. It will enable students to approach literature from a variety of practical and theoretical positions, and equip them with a working knowledge of how critics and readers develop and articulate interpretations. It provides an overview of the concerns of literary theory and outstanding schools of criticism. In addition, this text may also be useful for those undergraduate students studying literary theory and criticism or those first-year graduate students who have had little or no exposure to literary theory.

This book holds to several basic premises. First, it assumes that there is no such thing as an innocent reading of a literary work: Whether our responses are emotional and spontaneous or well-reasoned and highly structured, all such interactions are based on some underlying factors that cause us to respond to a text in a particular fashion. What elicits these responses or how a reader makes sense or meaning out of a text is what really matters. Literary theory questions our responses, our interpretations, and our assumptions, beliefs, and feelings. To understand why we respond to a text in a certain way, we must first understand literary theory and criticism.

Second, since our reactions to any literary work or indeed any printed material have theoretical bases, I have assumed 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 Jonathan Culler maintains, we make sense out of printed material. The methods and techniques we use to frame our personal interpretations of any text directly involve us in the process of literary criticism and theory, and automatically make us practicing literary critics.

My third assumption rests on the observation that each reader's literary theory is either conscious or unconscious, complete or incomplete, informed or ill-informed, eclectic or unified. Since an unconscious, incom-

plete, ill-informed and eclectic literary theory often 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 personal methods of interpretation, permitting them to order, clarify, and justify their personal appraisals of a text in a consistent and logical manner.

More frequently than not, however, 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 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 literary interpretation.

Chapter 1 introduces the basic concerns of literary theory and criticism and defines various theoretical terms. After making students aware that literary theory and criticism exist, I present a working definition of literature itself. Such a definition, I hope, will become the starting point for each student's personal definition of literature and for his or her exploration of multiple interpretations of a text.

Chapter 2 places literary theory and criticism in historical perspective. Starting with Plato and ending with Henry James, students are exposed to some of the leading theorists and literary critics from the Greeks to the beginning of the twentieth century. Since this is an introductory and not an advanced text, students will read about Plato, Aristotle, and Alexander Pope, for example, rather than reading these authors' primary texts. I hope that the individual discussions of each theorist or critic will arouse students' interest and lead them to read some primary works by the authors who address their concerns and stimulate their fancy.

In chapters 3 through 10 I discuss individually eight major schools or theoretical positions that have developed in the twentieth century: New Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Feminism, Marxism, and New Historicism. To maintain consistency, each of these chapters is organized identically. We begin with a brief Introduction that presents a few of the major beliefs or tenets of that particular school or theoretical position. Next comes the Historical Development, followed by the Assumptions section that sets forth the philosophical principles upon which the school of criticism is based. In the following section, Methodology, we discuss the procedures used by adherents of that school or theoretical position. The methodology sections serve as a "how to" manual for explaining the techniques used by various critics to formulate an interpretation of a text based on their philosophical assumptions. Each chapter closes with an essay written by a college junior, in which the student applies the principles and methods of the school of criticism under discussion to one of the three primary texts included at the

end of the book. I have chosen not to edit the students' essays in order to let other students critique and evaluate them.

The three literary works that appear are Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess," and Susan Glaspell's one-act play *Trifles.* By including these selections in the volume, we provide easy access and enable readers to judge for themselves the success and strengths of the student essays.

A detailed Glossary defines the key terms highlighted in the text. In addition, the Glossary provides an overview of the eight schools of twentieth-century criticism covered, and will be most helpful for teaching and reinforcing important theoretical terms and concepts.

At the back of the book we provide a detailed Bibliography divided into two parts. The first part lists introductory and general surveys of literary criticism that supplement this book. The second part lists theoretical sources for more advanced students who may wish to further their knowledge. Finally, the References section cites the works consulted during the writing of this book, chapter by chapter, and may be useful for further research.

Instructors should keep in mind that this is an introductory text aimed at college undergraduates who are beginning their study of literature and literary theory. For this reason the explanations of the various schools of criticism should not be considered as exhaustive. Instead, each chapter should be viewed as a first step toward an understanding of some rather difficult concepts, principles, and methodologies. After reading each chapter, it is hoped that the students will continue their own investigations of literary theory and criticism by reading advanced theoretical texts and the primary works of both theoretical and practical critics.

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Contents

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Criticism, Theory, and Literature

> Once I said to myself it would be a thousand times better for Jim to be a slave at home where his family was, as long as he'd *got* to be a slave, and so I'd better write a letter to Tom Sawyer and tell him to tell Miss Watson where he was. But I soon give up that notion, for two things: she'd be mad and disgusted at his rascality and ungratefulness for leaving her, and so she'd sell him straight down the river again; and if she didn't, everybody naturally despises an ungrateful nigger, and they'd make Jim feel it all the time, and so he'd feel ornery and disgraced. And then think of *me*! It would get all around that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was to ever see anybody from that town again I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame. That's just the way: a person does a low-down thing, and then he don't want to take no consequences of it. Thinks as long as he can hide it, it ain't no disgrace. That was my fix exactly. The more I studied about this the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't agoing to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, "There was the Sunday school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learn't you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire."
>
> It made me shiver. . . .
>
> *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* Chapter 31

In this climactic scene from Mark Twain's novel, the protagonist, Huckleberry Finn, must decide whether or not he should inform Miss Watson of the location of Jim, her runaway slave. Having helped Jim es-

cape from Miss Watson's homestead and having spent several days and nights with Jim floating down the Mississippi River on a raft, Huck has become Jim's friend, eating, playing, and even philosophizing with him about the creation of the stars and moon. In the midst of their adventures both on and off the raft, Huck and Jim meet up with two scoundrels, the Duke and the Dauphin. Through a series of events hatched by these tricksters, Jim is once again sold into slavery, this time for forty dollars. Knowing Jim's present fate, Huck must decide if he should write Jim's lawful owner and tell her that her slave is being held at Silas Phelps' farm, or simply keep quiet about Jim's whereabouts.

In this scene, we, the readers, watch Huck struggle with his decision. Along with Huck, we too wonder if Jim should be returned to his home and family, since, as Huck notes, Jim has "got to be a slave" anyway. At first Huck decides that he should not write Miss Watson, for two reasons: (1) She will be so angry at Jim for his "ungratefulness" for leaving her and for causing her such trouble in the first place that she may decide to sell him to another owner or simply choose to keep him, in which case Jim would feel "ornery and disgraced" in his town, for "everybody naturally despises an ungrateful nigger"; and (2) Huck's letter would stigmatize him as one who helped a slave get his freedom, forever shaming him in the eyes of his townsfolk. At first, we may accept Huck's reasoning as logical, but upon closer scrutiny we may be startled at Huck and his society. Do they not treat Jim and other blacks as property, as something to be owned, and not as people? Or perhaps we need to ask if Twain himself is presenting an accurate picture of the white, middle-class American view of blacks in the 1850s. Is the author's analysis of his society and its people's feelings, beliefs, and prejudices true to life, or is Twain simply inserting his own opinions in the mouths of his characters? Furthermore, we may wonder how Twain's contemporary audience responded to this scene. Did they nod their heads in agreement with Huck Finn and his analysis of the townsfolk and Miss Watson, or did they declare that Twain himself was simply fictionalizing and "playing with the truth" to enhance his own viewpoint or even to promote the sale of his novel?

As Huck continues his internal debate, he experiences an epiphany: Providence, he thinks, is "slapping him in the face" for stealing a poor lady's slave. Troubled by his conscience, he declares that "One" up in heaven has been noting his wickedness, and he, Huckleberry Finn, is without excuse. Like Huck, we too question his so-called wickedness. Is he really a thief for snatching Jim from slavery? Is the source of his troubling conscience "someone" in heaven or simply the internalized molding influences and dictates of his society? Indeed, is there really a "someone" in heaven in the first place? And does Twain himself posit the existence of a god in heaven or not? Moreover, should Twain's beliefs concerning the existence of any god influence or concern us, the readers?

By answering any or all of the above questions or any other question evoked by Twain's text, we have become practicing literary critics.

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 study, analyze, interpret, and evaluate a work of art. By necessity, Arnold would argue, this discipline attempts to formulate aesthetic and methodological principles on the basis of 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 explore those 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.

When analyzing a work of art, literary critics ask basic questions concerning the philosophical, psychological, functional, and descriptive nature of a text. Since the time of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, the answers to these questions have been seriously debated. By asking questions of Twain's or any other text, and by contemplating answers, we too can become participants in this debate. Whether we question if Huckleberry Finn is committing sin by not sending a letter to Miss Watson, or whether we attempt to discover the chief influences working on Huck's conscience, we are participating in an ongoing discussion of the value, worth, and enjoyment of Twain's novel 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 theories, principles, and tenets regarding 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** (known also as **applied criticism**) then applies the theories and tenets of theoretical criticism to a particular work—*Huckleberry Finn,* for example. It is the **practical critic** who 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 one and only one theory or set of principles a critic may utilize when evaluating a literary work—the **absolutist critic**—and the **relativistic critic,** who employs various and even contradictory theories in critiquing a piece of literature. The basis, how-

ever, for either kind of critic, or for any form of criticism, is literary theory. Without theory, practical criticism could not exist.

What Is Literary Theory?

When reading *Huckleberry Finn,* we necessarily interact with the text, asking specific, text-related questions, such as What are Huck's personal feelings for Jim? What was the concept of slavery during Huck's times? What was Jim's concept of self-worth? Such questions involve us in practical criticism. What we tend to forget during the actual reading process is that we have read other literary works. Our response to any text, then—or the principles of practical criticism we apply to it—is largely a conditioned or programmed one—that is, how we arrive at meaning in fiction is in part determined by our past experiences. Consciously or unconsciously, we have developed a mind-set or framework concerning our expectations when reading a novel, a short story, a poem, or any other type of literature. In addition, what we choose to value or uphold as good or bad, moral or immoral, or beautiful or ugly within a given text actually depends on this ever-evolving framework. To articulate this framework and piece together the various elements of our practical criticism into a coherent, unified body of knowledge is to formulate our **literary theory.**

Since anyone who responds to a text is already a practicing literary critic, every reader espouses some kind of literary theory. Each reader's theory, however, may be conscious or unconscious, complete or incomplete, informed or ill-informed, eclectic or unified. An incomplete, unconscious, and therefore unclear literary theory 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 whereby they can establish principles that enable them to justify, order, and clarify their own appraisals of a text in a consistent manner.

A well-articulated literary theory assumes that an innocent reading of a text or a sheerly emotional or spontaneous reaction to a work cannot exist, for theory questions the assumptions, beliefs, and feelings of readers, asking why they respond to a text in a certain way. 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 makes meaning out of the text, is what matters.

How we as readers make meaning out of or from the text will depend upon the mental framework that each of us has developed concerning the nature of reality. This framework or **worldview** consists of "the assumptions or presuppositions that we all hold (either consciously or unconsciously) concerning the basic makeup of our world." We all struggle, for

example, to find answers to such questions as these: What is the basis of morality or ethics? What is the meaning of human history? Is there an overarching purpose for humanity's existence? What are beauty, truth, and 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, with our environment, and with our own personal philosophies, we continue to grapple with these issues, often changing our ideas. But it is our 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, the worthiness, and the value of art itself. Using their worldviews either consciously or unconsciously as a yardstick by which to measure and value their experiences, readers will respond to individual works of literature, ordering and valuing each separate or collective experience in the work based on the system of beliefs housed in their worldviews.

During the act of reading, this process becomes evident, for when we are 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/her past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, the reader marshals his/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/her as a human being.

Accordingly, 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 or interact, creating meaning, for meaning does not exist either solely within the reader's mind or solely within the text, Rosenblatt maintains, but in the interaction between them. To arrive at an interpretation of a text, readers bring their own "temperament and fund of past transactions to the text 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 worldview.

Since no literary theory can account for all the various factors included