

FIFTH EDITION

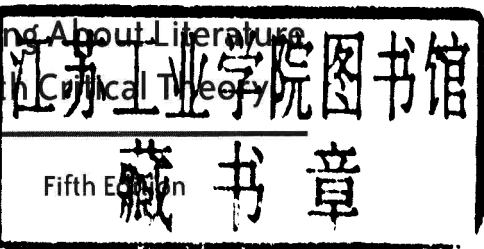
STEVEN LYNN

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

WRITING ABOUT
LITERATURE WITH
CRITICAL THEORY

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

Writing About Literature
with Critical Theory



STEVEN LYNN

University of South Carolina



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Preface

*As teachers, we need to
remember what the world looked
like before we learned our
discipline's way of seeing it. We
need to show our students the
patient and painstaking processes
by which we achieved expertise.
Only by making our footsteps
visible can we expect students to
follow in them.*

—Sam Wineburg, Professor,
Stanford University

*The Chronicle of Higher
Education* (4/11/03), B20

This book aims to show students as clearly as possible how to think of interesting and insightful things to say about literary texts, and how to organize these insights and observations into effective arguments and responses. Like the previous four editions, this book aspires to invigorate literary study by “making our footsteps visible,” as Sam Wineburg puts it above, conveying at an introductory level the assumptions, strategies, and questions available in the practice of critical analysis. This edition continues to update some of the exciting and influential ways that literary study continues to evolve.

Critical theories are the invention strategies that drive the process of writing about texts. By explaining critical theories, this book aims to take the mystery and frustration out of writing about literature. Critical theory isn't too difficult for students who are just learning how to write and think about challenging literary texts; writing about literature is in fact unnecessarily difficult and frustrating *without a clear understanding of theory*. And since every discipline depends on various assumptions about language, meaning, and knowledge; and every discipline involves reading and writing, interpreting data, and constructing arguments, then critical theory and literary study are vitally important. Every educated person can and should understand the fundamentals involved.

ORGANIZATION

The first two chapters prepare students for the in-depth tour of the world of critical theory in Chapters 3 through 8. The first chapter addresses some fundamental questions: “Is there one correct interpretation of a literary work?” “Are all opinions equally valid?” “Does theory distract from literary study?” “Is theory too difficult for an introductory-level course?” The answers to these deceptively simple questions underscore both the necessity and the feasibility of working with theory in introductory courses. The second chapter then offers a survey of the theories covered here, illustrating a variety of approaches by explaining how each one might be applied to the same text.

Each particular theoretical orientation is in a sense like a different place, a different culture that inhabits its own set of values and practices. The maps at the beginnings of these chapters are intended as playful reminders of this insight: each theory involves a different way of seeing, from a different perspective. The first section in each chapter is an orientation: the basic principles of a particular theoretical orientation are elicited out of the analysis of a poem. In “The Purpose of New Criticism,” for instance, which is the first part of Chapter 3, an analysis of an Archibald MacLeish poem reveals the assumptions of what is called New Criticism. The second section of each theory chapter explains the process of applying these assumptions. In Chapter 3 the section entitled “How to Do New Criticism” takes students step by step through the process of “doing” a New Critical reading.

The third section of these chapters illustrates the construction of an essay, from start to finish, using that chapter’s theory. The sample essay in Chapter 3, for instance, traces the evolution of an essay on Gwendolyn Brooks’s masterful poem, “The Mother.” The fourth and final section provides some literary works to practice upon—works that will resonate in some way with the other works in the chapters. In “Practicing New Criticism,” three poems about fatherhood are offered, balancing in several senses Brooks’s “The Mother.” The tour of each theory ends with a list of the “Works Cited” in the chapter, and recommendations for “Further Reading.”

After this theoretical tour, a final chapter discusses writing a research paper in a digital age—how to locate and evaluate library and Internet sources, and how to use literary texts and databases. The chapter reviews the theories covered by working through a research paper about the application of various theories to a W. B. Yeats poem.

WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION?

There are many changes in this edition, both subtle and obvious. I wasn't able to include a GPS to help students find their classrooms, as one student suggested, but I have benefited from many other suggestions by students and teachers. Like any human endeavor, literary criticism is dynamic, and so the additions, deletions, and alterations are also an attempt to reflect the evolution of the field. In particular:

- **Structuralism** gets more attention in this edition because some readers and reviewers persuasively argued that deconstruction would be more richly understood with an expanded treatment of its precursor, and also because structuralism is an important approach in its own right.
- **Postcolonialism, queer theory, African-American criticism, gender studies, and cultural studies** continue to be increasingly important and interesting movements, transforming the study of literature. These approaches receive updated and expanded coverage in this edition.
- **The recommended reading** lists have again been updated and expanded, reflecting the most current trends and offering more guidance on where to go for additional treatment.
- **Websites** are included as part of the recommended sources, but I have again tried to be careful to include only those sites that are authored or controlled by reliable entities. The sites recommended are likely to exist when you try to check them out, and they are also likely to provide good materials. Alan Liu's Voice of the Shuttle website or Jack Lynch's bibliographical site, for instance, offers information that can be used with confidence. A high school student's class project on "post-modernism" is equally accessible on the Internet, but it is not likely to be equally authoritative.
- **The research paper** coverage includes consideration of electronic sources and the ethics of research—topics that are especially important given the easy availability of misleading information and ready-made essays.
- The electronic **Instructor's Manual** has been updated to reflect the additions to this edition. The manual can be requested from your local Longman representative.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To those people who have adopted a previous edition, I am very grateful. Many people have made helpful suggestions, sometimes when I was walking across campus or losing golf balls, and their names may not appear in the long list below. In that case, I'm sorry. I do appreciate your help. I'm especially indebted to Bill Rivers, Ed Madden, and Lee Bauknight, my fellow teacher-trainers, and to all the graduate students who have taken English 701B with me, and who have helped to establish that this pedagogy works.

I also want to thank the following reviewers, some of whom assessed the need for a fifth edition and made extremely useful suggestions, and others who evaluated previous editions:

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I gratefully acknowledge the support of the University of South Carolina.

I'm most thankful for my parents, Ben and Leora Lynn; for my parents-in-law, Chester and Dorothy Williams; and for my wife and daughter, Annette and Anna, to whom this book is dedicated.

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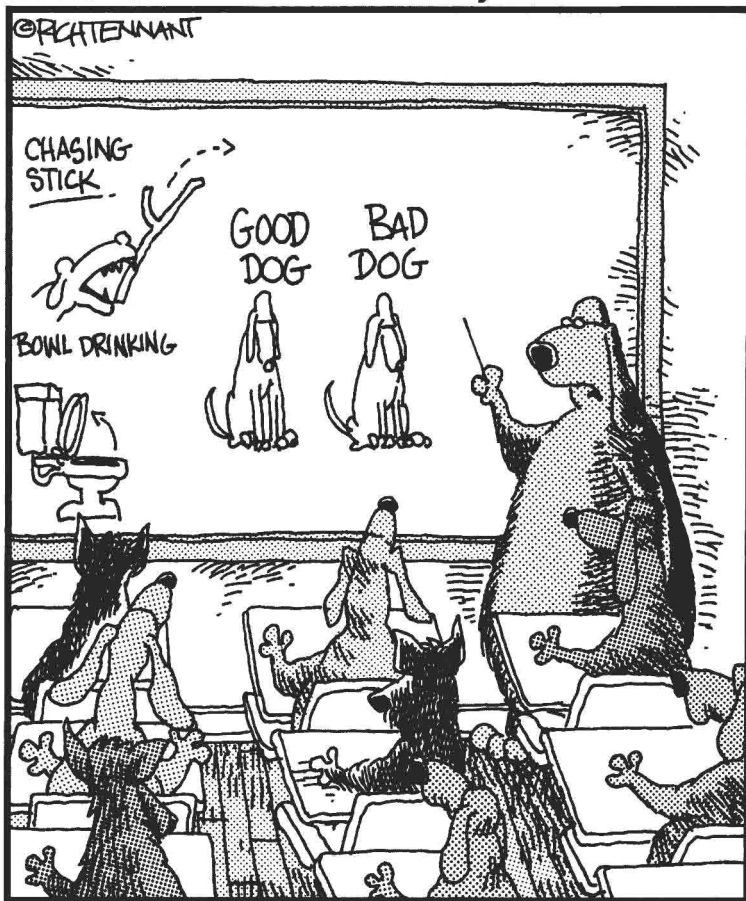
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TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



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

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? For some of the same reasons we ought to travel—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.

But why should we write about literature? 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 and the last chapter of this book can help you locate this kind of reliable and