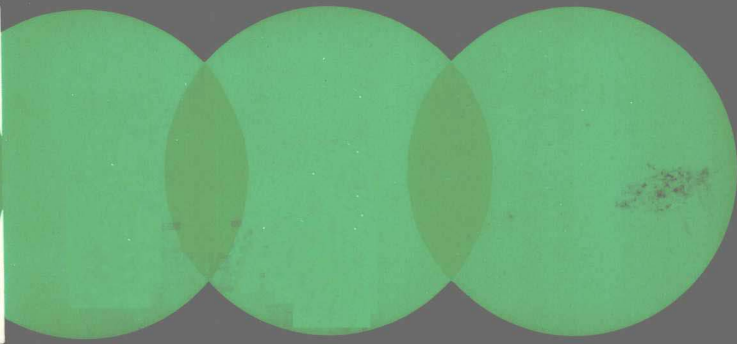
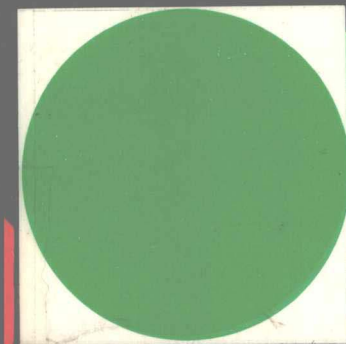


Thirty-Five Literary Ideas

A Manual

"Our authors have left no style untried."

— Horace, *Ars Poetica*



by Peter Thorpe

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G I N N P R E S S

160 Gould Street
Needham Heights, Massachusetts 02194

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To my son, Paul

The purpose of this manual is to make some major literary ideas accessible for the average reader. The term “literary ideas” refers to the kind of ideological content that is regularly found in texts and backgrounds of the ancient and modern classics. It is hoped that this manual will help to “clarify” famous authors from the time of Homer and Plato to the twentieth century. On the other hand, it is not the purpose of this book to define literary forms or specific techniques. Thus, we will not be concerned with “the rhyme schemes of sonnets,” “the omniscient point of view,” or “the differences between the Pindaric and Horatian odes.” Our purpose rather is to discuss the ideational backgrounds of forms, rather than the forms themselves.

The manual is organized in alphabetical order, with frequent cross-references (in capitals) among the various sections. No effort is made to cover the entire spectrum of literary ideas — such an undertaking would fill many volumes. Instead, the goal here is to present a selection of the most important or persistent concepts, with the understanding that the student may wish to read further on her own. Accordingly, the sections are brief, giving an overview, rather than a comprehensive treatment.

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BIOGRAPHY

There's an old theory that fiction and biography are opposites: whereas fiction bends the facts to fit its theme, biography bends its theme to fit the facts. Presumably, the biographer examines the material objectively to find the consistent idea in it, whereas the novelist or short-story writer approaches the material with a thesis, arranging the material to make it support the idea.

The trouble with the above theory is that it overlooks the possibility that fiction and biography always overlap. In reconstructing their scenes, biographers tend to rely on imagination and interpolation to tell "the whole story" of a great man or woman. Because no biographer ever has all the facts — or even half of them?— biographical writing is a fairly creative undertaking. The most renowned biography in English, James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) repeatedly relies on Boswell's powerful imagination to produce the keen dramas of Dr. Samuel Johnson's life, many of which took place before Boswell was born. Later, Boswell took copious notes on Johnson's witty conversation, but he frequently didn't get around to writing these notes until some days — or weeks — after the conversation had occurred. Given the frailties of human memory, we know that a significant portion of the *Life of Johnson* is creative writing — and very good creative writing, at that.

Moreover, Boswell has political and social axes to grind, so that his version of Johnson is skewed somewhat by the constant efforts to portray a famous man in a certain light that at times may vary with the facts. Although Boswell acknowledges Johnson's faults, he was so fond of Johnson that the effect of his book is to elevate him to a kind of pedestal. The point is, biography seems to be a rather subjective business, and it's probably true that even the most open-minded and rational biographer will always fail in his or her efforts to produce a totally unbiased work.

There may be some structural (not artistic) resemblances between Boswell's favoritistic book and the sorts of biographies that appear at election time. These hastily produced polemics can be radically unbalanced, either pro or con. Perhaps the positive thing about campaign biographies is that most of them don't even pretend to be totally objective or "fair" — whereas some of the great literary biographies are so persuasive and well written that they can give the illusion of total objectivity. Such may be the case with *The Life of Johnson* and a host of others, including *The Annals of Imperial Rome* by the ancient historian Tacitus; Bishop Asser's ninth-century *Life of Alfred the Great*; and William Mason's eighteenth-century *Life and Writings of [Thomas] Gray*. Mason, like Boswell, used the strategy of incorporating letters by his subject, which furthers the apparent effect of rational objectivity. By the way, many early biographers used their subjects to convey moral or spiritual standards — to hold up an example worthy of imitation. An extreme manifestation of this trend is "hagiography," or writings concerning the lives of the saints.

A popular strategy through which the biographer achieves the effect of depth and credibility is to focus on not one but many persons in the same book, in a kind of "Life and Times" approach. Like Tacitus, Suetonius, another ancient Roman, used this practice in his *Twelve Caesars*, and it is of course used in the Bible too, which in a manner of speaking is a collection of biographies. Similar strategies occur in Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), and such is the aggregate effect of John Aubrey's seventeenth-century *Brief Lives*.

In the present century, the tendency to interpret "creatively" has continued in fine biographies such as Carl Sandburg's series on Lincoln and Leon Edel's writings on Henry James. Incidentally, it's not unusual for the twentieth-century biographer to be influenced by FREUDIANISM and to "psychoanalyze" the subject. A case in point is the "research" of Van Wyck Brooks, who tried to "read" the subconscious mind of Mark Twain. But in all centuries, it seems that biography cannot be written totally free of theoretical preconceptions, whether they are Freudian, Darwinian, Christian, or simply political. A perennial question among those who write the lives of major historical figures is whether great persons create history or history creates great persons. There is also some question as to whether it's ever possible for a biographer to hate his topic, even when writing of a "true villain."

A close relative of the biography (literally "life-writing") is autobiography ("self-life-writing"). Like any other biographer, the person who writes his or her own life is prone to fictionalize here and there, if only because memory is never infallible. Moreover, the autobiographer may have a thesis or a defense to put forward — a justification for the way he lived his life. In recent years, the "I-did-it-my-way" trend can be seen in "pop" biographies by such celebrities as Shelley Winters, David Niven, and the jazz musician Miles Davis. We note too that some novels are almost totally autobiographical and are thinly disguised chronicles of the author's psychic history. Perhaps the most lurid recent example is *The Bell Jar*, by Sylvia Plath.

Because the imagination is never absent from autobiography, we can see that fiction with a "first-person narrator" can often succeed in its effort to sound like an authentic life story. Indeed, its convincingness and verisimilitude are major reasons why we enjoy it. Even the most fanciful yarns can seem real when narrated by a voice that seems totally human, as in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, or *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allen Poe. (See REALISM.)

Speaking of *Crusoe*, we note that some of this novel is based on the actual experiences of one Alexander Selkirk, a mariner who spent five years on a remote island (it's twenty-eight years in Defoe's account). Actually, it's hard to find novels which don't incorporate a great deal of fact from the real world. An extreme example of this tendency is the "roman à clef," a novel in which actual persons and places appear under other names. "Roman à clef" literally means "a novel with a key." In a less obvious manner, a number of the best writers of fiction use persons who are real, as in the work of James Joyce and Bernard Malamud. Henry James seems to have used actual persons in his fiction, sometimes changing their age or their sex.

In the final analysis, the line between biography and fiction tends to become blurred and indistinct, so that the imaginary and the factual begin to coexist in the reader's mind. Bending the facts to fit the theme and bending the theme to fit the facts are activities which are manifestly human. Fiction that is deep and compelling will often sound like biography; and the major biographers, those who handle their material with high artistry, will impress their audiences as creative writers of the

first order. The sophisticated biographer, like the writer of good fiction, aims to convince and to convey a powerful impression and an authentic set of ideas.

As food for thought, let's conclude with a sentiment from Dr. Samuel Johnson, himself a brilliant biographer: "If a biographer writes from personal knowledge, and makes haste to gratify the public curiosity, there is danger lest his interest, his fear, his gratitude, or his tenderness overpower his fidelity, and tempt him to conceal, if not to invent." (—from *The Rambler*, no. 60.)

COMEDY

Probably the most intriguing definition of comedy is that of Henri Bergson, the French philosopher, who published his renowned essay, *Laughter*, in 1900. In this piece, as well as in his other writings, Bergson maintains that life is defined by its changeableness — its elasticity, flexibility, and unpredictability. Thus, to achieve any measure of seriousness and dignity, we have to bend with the situation. When we are rigid and fail to change with the flexibilities of life, we are ridiculous and potentially comic.

Bergson's essay on *Laughter* (*Le Rire* in French) develops the idea of comic inflexibility in great detail. He defines comedy as essentially "something mechanical encrusted upon the living," and he says that we laugh at those who behave more like rigid machines than like human beings. The best way to grasp Bergson's thinking is to keep in mind the image of the machine.

He breaks "the mechanical enrusted on the living" into three subcategories. First, the mechanical in comedy may show up as "repetition" (all machines are repetitious). Secondly, it may show up as "inversion." And thirdly, it may take the form of what Bergson calls "reciprocal interference of series." Each of these three subcategories may manifest itself in three ways: in character, in words, and in situations.

Repetition occurs when a character has a fixation or a "hobby horse" that causes his behavior to rigidify. The old-time comedian Jack Benny always played the miser, no matter what the situation, even when he was threatened with death. When we laugh at a friend who is a bit of a "character," saying "I knew he'd do that," we are pointing out his rigidity, relative to the ever-changing, flexible patterns of life. Or a character may have a saying that he always uses, such as Bugs Bunny's "What's up, Doc?" or George Bush's "thousand points of light," which the President used so often that it finally became comic. Or the repetition may occur in situations, such as the one we've all experienced, in which we see a friend in the morning and say hello, not expecting to see him for the rest of the day. But sometimes, we run into him again, and perhaps even a third time. By this stage, the matter is becoming laughable, and one of us may make a wisecrack, such as "We've got to stop meeting this way!" Bergson's point is that life doesn't repeat itself; if made to, it can be funny.

Inversion, the second manifestation of the mechanical, occurs in characters when, for example, they are adults but let the child in themselves take over. Comedies over the centuries are full of characters of this sort, authority-figures who are irascible and moody and unreasonable as children — the Archie Bunkers of yesteryear. The personality, as it were, has been turned upside-down, with the child dominating the man, as in the drunken cowardly knight, Sir John Falstaff. There are plenty of these character-inversions in Shakespeare, but perhaps the most entertaining are found in the plays of Molière, the seventeenth-century playwright, from whose hilarious comedies Bergson derives many examples for his theories. Inversion happens in words too, as we note by

the fact that we can make a somber saying ridiculous by reversing the order: "I regret that I have but one country to give for my life." Playing with words in this manner is stock-in-trade in comedy, as far back as Aristophanes, the ancient Greek author who parodied serious language in *The Birds*, *The Frogs* and other plays.

The third item for Bergson is "reciprocal interference of series," which means the overlapping of two different actions or stories or "series" which ought to be separate but have gotten tangled up in each other. Many characters have "built-in" overlaps, such as Mr. Spock in *Star Trek*, who, as half human and half Vulcan, can be quite funny, as he combines the temperaments of two different planets which, in theory, ought to be separate. A good example of "situational" overlap was furnished by Mark Twain, in his *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. A nineteenth-century man was sent back through time into the middle ages, to bring his "advanced technology" to the Round Table. The misunderstandings between the different time-periods generate much comedy. Similar overlappings of time-periods have caused humor in popular shows such as *Topper Returns* and the *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. But reciprocal interference of series need not involve time, and it often happens when there is simply a total misunderstanding between two characters, or when people are talking about two different things without realizing it. In Molière's *The Miser*, Jacques says, "I'll be back soon. Meanwhile, have them cut his throat, singe his feet, throw him in boiling water, and hang him from the ceiling." The Miser thinks Jacques is talking about a robber, but he's merely talking about a suckling pig to be served for dinner. Regarding words, we observe that all word-play and puns are actually reciprocal interference of series, because they yoke together two realms which ought to be distinct. As the comic Mercutio dies in *Romeo and Juliet*, he says, "Ask for me tomorrow, and thou shall find me a grave man," thrusting together two different ideas. In summary: much of comedy is based on the kind of misunderstanding that produces incongruity.

In developing his theory of comedy, Bergson emphasized that the mechanical sort of behavior is comical only if we are not directly or emotionally involved in it, and if it is not dangerous. The clown's pratfall is funny, as long as we don't have to experience the pain; and the rigid father-figures in comedy are amusing — provided that they don't keep control of the society. Molière's Miser, if left to his own devices, would destroy the worlds of practically all the other characters in the play.

Bergson also stressed that comedy is essentially the business of the group. Material seems funnier if we experience it with an audience, and jokes among friends go better if told to more than one person. Also, Bergson noted that comedy, while not necessarily inculcating moral lessons, has a tendency to cause its characters to conform to the group. It does not as a rule interest itself in the separatism, isolation, and high individualism of TRAGEDY. The mechanical or the rigid may appear in tragedy, but here it is not comical; it is deadly and threatening instead, like the oracle in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

Bergson's approach to comedy is structural more than ethical or moral. He was writing partly in response to George Meredith, a Victorian critic who published *An Essay on Comedy* in 1877. Meredith believed that comedy could advance morality and civility by promoting what he called "thoughtful laughter." His "reasoning" went like this: Our "common sense" causes "thoughtful laughter" at "folly." "Folly," in turn, is caused by either "unreason" or "sentimentalism." He felt that comedy had a natural tendency to seek out "folly" as its prey, showing it for what it was.

To this day, the argument as to whether comedy is moral or structural continues. One of the best structural theorists is Northrop Frye, who says (in his *Anatomy of Criticism*) that comic characters can be placed in four categories:

1. the "alazon," who is the inflexible authority-figure.
2. the "eiron," who is the clever fellow trying to maneuver around the alazon, usually to get the girl.
3. the "agroikos," who is a sort of "straight man" against whom the comic happenings define themselves. He may also stand for rustic simplicity (his name is related to "agriculture").
4. The "buffoon," who is not especially structural or "functional" but who helps furnish the festive and comic atmosphere.

Comic structures are generated by the interplay and the dynamics among the four types of characters. Though probably too sweeping or general, Frye's categories are useful as a point of departure for discussions of comic actions.

Frye also interests himself in the "pharmakos," or the scapegoat, pointing out (earlier critics had mentioned it too) that, in order for the "happy ending" to occur, it often seems as though someone has to be sacrificed to "pay for it." Such is the case with Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Most comedies have the tendency to reject one or two characters at the end, as if there is a price-tag on happiness. Frye also observes that the "movement" of comedy is often from initial isolation to inclusion: the hero may begin as a newcomer or outsider, but frequently by the end he is at the center — and in control — of the society. In the meantime, he may have to undergo considerable ordeals to get to his goal, and it often seems as though he passes through something like death and is reborn. We know that the origins of comedy in ancient Greece had to do with rituals in which death was a character who was physically removed from the scene, as if comedy exists primarily to assert life in face of the inevitability of death.

Northrop Frye was anticipated by many centuries in the delightful *Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer, who also understood scapegoating and outsiderism. Chaucer used a standard medieval theory of human behavior known as the "Four Humors." These are the sanguine, the choleric, the melancholy, and the phlegmatic. The sanguine man is supposed to have too much blood in his system, which makes him almost too jolly, sometimes boisterous and explosive. The choleric (as in "cholera") man is irritable and difficult. The melancholic man has too much "black bile," which makes him potentially moody and changeable, like the English weather. Finally, the phlegmatic man, as the name implies, is a sluggish fellow. Chaucer furnished examples of all of these in his *General Prologue* to his *Canterbury Tales*, but he also knew that human behavior is finally too complicated to be relegated to four simple categories.

Incidentally, the four humors seem to anticipate Frye's four categories of comic characters: sanguine (alazon); melancholy (eiron); choleric (buffoon); and phlegmatic (agroikos).

In the Renaissance, the dramatist Ben Jonson (a friend of Shakespeare), made the humor theory more complex, by suggesting that there are as many different humors as there are human traits. In Jonson's definition, a humor is any normal trait that is greatly exaggerated, so as to take over the whole personality. Molière's Miser has the

normal trait of a sense of economy, but it is so inflated that it causes his behavior to become mechanical and obsessive.

There is something about comedy that causes the critics and theorizers to categorize. A recent critic is Elder Olson, who in a book called *The Theory of Comedy* says that, essentially, there are only four kinds of comic plot: the well-intentioned wit, the well-intentioned fool, the ill-intentioned wit, and the ill-intentioned fool. These do apply to hundreds of comic tales, even though they don't tell the whole story of comedy.

Olson also said that comedy brings about a "katastasis," which is a sudden relaxing of tension. Here he was anticipated by the philosopher Immanuel Kant and by thinkers as far back as the ancient Roman poet Horace, who said we might laugh when "a mountain labors to give birth to a mouse." The idea is that comedy builds up suspense, and then anti-climactically deflates it. It traffics in the "surprisingly insignificant," that which builds us up and then drops us. Thus it is true, to a certain extent, that all comedy, from the major plays of Shakespeare or George Bernard Shaw, to the joke told in the men's room, have this anti-climactic or "false alarm" characteristic. Molière leads us to believe that the Miser will endanger all, and then the whole threat falls in a heap. Anyone who has played with an infant can see this human tendency to laugh at that which is "built up" and then released, as in "peek-a-boo" and dozens of other games for small children. It may be that at the basis of comedy is a surge of youthful or even childish feeling, even when such feeling is found in characters who are middle-aged and beyond.

In an incisive book called *Feeling and Form*, Susanne Langer suggests that the structure of comedy parallels the constant pattern of "upset and regain" that every living organism experiences. In so simple a thing as walking, we are constantly losing and regaining our balance — and that is the pattern of comedy too: a threat that the Miser will upset our world, and then a regaining of equilibrium as the Miser is defeated. Similarly, a one-liner joke can momentarily puzzle us or throw us "off balance," and then, as we "get it," put us back on both feet. Upset and regain: this is life itself, according to Langer, who believes that the laughter and the "surge of vital feeling" produced by genuine comedy occur because comic action reinforces our sense of being truly alive.

Let's conclude with the suggestion that it's possible that the patterns and meanings of comedy are more complex than those of tragedy, because whereas tragedy deals with destiny and the finalities of death, comedy deals with the on-going complications of life, in a vital circle that never ends. Appropriately, the plots of comedy are usually double (e.g., two sets of lovers) and are complicated and "busy" to the point that they may actually be hard to follow — for there is something comical in complication itself. The plot of tragedy is almost always single, "slim," and streamlined. Tragedy avoids over-busy complications because they can detract from its seriousness. On the other hand, comedy thrives on "heavy traffic," on mix-ups and misunderstandings. In this sense, it is very much like life itself.

CRITICISM

Although literary criticism may seem to be the exclusive business of academia, it is a very natural human activity, and it is practiced — even if subconsciously — by nearly everyone who is literate. Our common sense tells us that to evaluate something, or make criticisms about it, is always a tendency in the human psyche. It is a way that we learn, and it is part of being alive. If we read a novel (or see a play, movie, or TV drama), we have an opinion about it, which we may want to convey to friends in a convincing way. This is not radically different from what the academic critic does. Let's look briefly at some of the "schools" of literary criticism and then return to examining the ways that we all function as critics.

The various schools overlap, of course, so what follows is simplified, for the sake of introducing the ideas of each. We follow no particular order here, because none is necessarily more important than any other.

1. **Biographical.** This nineteenth-century school believes that literature is best understood and evaluated by studying the author's life, in order to bring to light the deeper meanings and the evolution of the work. To this day, literary biographies can be best-sellers, especially if the author's life was wild, lurid, tragic, etc.
2. **Historical.** A nineteenth-century enterprise which has been recently revived, this approach investigates the historical contexts of the work, to see how it reflects its times and to see if the history surrounding it can shed light on the art of the work. Historical criticism today tends to emphasize "historicity" — i.e., history is determined by immutable laws and must be interpreted "authentically," without intrusions of subjectivity or ideological preconceptions.
3. **Feminist.** Not necessarily restricted to women in its "membership," this movement examines literature to see if it represents women fairly and to see if it can be illuminated by applying female perspectives to it (see also FEMINISM).
4. **Psychological.** Here, characters and events in the work are interpreted in psychological terms (Oedipal, fixated, compulsive, etc.), or the author himself may be studied in psychological terms. The assumption is that art arises from the psyche and therefore is a psychological "artifact."
5. **Linguistic.** This group, assuming that literature is language before it is anything else, investigates the structure of language in order to find the "centrality" of the work. Since literature can have no initial mode of existence other than the language in which it is written, the linguistic approach claims that it gets at the very

foundations of literature and that no valid discussion of the work can go forward until the linguistic problems are addressed.

6. **Sociological.** This school usually has overtones of Marxism but is not necessarily restricted to that. It assesses literature mainly in terms of how well it caters to the sociological needs of the populace. In this context, a novel or poem could be deemed an artistic failure if it turned its back on social issues, or (if the critic were Marxist) it appeared to embrace capitalism.
7. **Interdisciplinary.** Literature is assessed or studied by comparison with other disciplines — e.g., Baroque poetry may be aligned with Baroque music, painting, architecture, and sculpture. It's believed that studying other kinds of art can illuminate the art of literature.
8. **Archetypal.** Related to, but not quite the same thing as, psychological criticism, this school is based on the theories of Carl Gustave Jung (d.1961). He believed that "below" each person's unconscious mind lies the "collective unconscious" of the human race, going perhaps as far back as our "prehuman" existence. Deep meanings are housed here, and they come to light in literature as "archetypes" — recognizable, deep-seated, recurring, "primordial" experiences of all of the human race. Examples would be the transition from innocence to experience, or various types of initiation. Jung felt that the collective unconscious was actually inherited, a belief which cost him some disciples. It may be that, if we have a "collective unconscious," it is a product of our nurture and environment. In any case, the archetypal critic looks for patterns which may recur in many different works (or MYTHS and folktales) and which may seem to "re-connect" us with our subconsciousness.
9. **The New Criticism.** This is one of the most important intellectual movements in the history of Academe. Reaching its zenith in the forties and fifties in America, it espoused the "close reading" or "line-by-line analysis" of literature, with an eye to the "structure" or "organic unity" of the piece. There was a heavy emphasis on irony and paradox, and similar emphasis on the imagery. The school studied poetry much more than prose and was particularly interested in the metaphysical poets of the early seventeenth century. Brushing aside most of the biographical, historical, and sociological backgrounds, the New Critics insisted on "the text itself," viewing the poem (or other genre) as though it were an entity unto itself, a "concrete" item with its own unique existence. Defenders of the movement point out that it caused us to look more closely at literature itself instead of getting bogged down in "backgrounds." Attackers point out that the New Criticism was too narrow in its approach and was also tainted with academic snobbery. Among its chief disciples were Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and Allen Tate.
10. **Deconstructionism.** This movement, also extremely influential in the "academy," is by and large a refutation of the "structuralism" of the New Criticism. Whereas the New Critic assumed that he could pin down in precise terms the meaning of the work, the deconstructionist argues that meaning is always elusive because of the very nature of language. Influenced by the linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the iconoclastic thinker Jacques Derrida, deconstructionism believes that

the thesis or "message" of a work is usually subverted by "pressures" of opposite meanings which are trying to "enter" the work and the mind of the reader. A thing is said chiefly by trying to cancel out its opposite, but the opposite can never be totally driven from the stage. Moreover, the reader may experience "erasures" in his mind as he reads, supplanting the text's intended meanings with those of his own memories of experience and other literatures.

11. **Teutonic.** The name of this school derives from scholarly practices in German universities in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. The emphasis was on sources or "influences," rather than the text itself. For example, rather than studying the lines of a Shakespeare play, the Teutonic critics (more accurately called scholars) would investigate the sources of the play. Eventually they were to come under fire from the New Critics, who charged that they never addressed the actual text.
12. **Art for Art's Sake.** Oscar Wilde (d.1900) was the most famous exponent of this movement, which reached its high-point in the last ten years — the "mauve decade" — of the nineteenth century. These critics felt that literature had no obligation but to be true unto itself, and that it rightly turned its back on society and on its very audience. Wilde once said that, rather than art imitating life, which was the traditional view, life should imitate art. And he himself, with his flourishes and outlandish costumes, seemed to be trying to live his life as a human work of art. Although there was much frivolousness in the "art-for-art's-sake" approach, it may have helped to pave the way for the intense focus on "the poem itself," which was to come along with the New Critics.
13. **Impressionism.** This movement is based on the desire to report, not what happens in the work, but rather what happens in the mind and soul of the reader. Popular in the later nineteenth century and early twentieth, it was unabashedly subjective. The idea of telling "what happened to me as I read the poem" rather than telling "what happens in the poem" was of course repugnant to the New Critics, who claimed to be fully objective. However, all criticism is fairly subjective.
14. **Minority or Ethnic.** Very important, starting with the sixties and still gaining momentum, the idea of studying literature in terms of "what it has to say" to (and about) minorities (or "protected classes") is a large "industry" today. This school keeps an eye out for any kind of ethnic or racial discrimination in the canons of art, and it usually goes forward on the assumption that literature cannot be great if it propounds — even unintentionally — any kind of bigotry. Incidentally, like Feminist and several other types of criticism, this school can easily overlap with biographical, historical, and many other branches of criticism. It also interests itself in images of ethnic or racial pride or identity that can be found in literature.
15. *Against Interpretation.* This phrase is the title of an influential collection of essays by Susan Sontag, a contemporary who, with a number of New York "literati," feels that the entire business of criticism has gotten in the way of our ability to experience art as something fresh and new. Our sensibilities have been dulled by a plethora of theory, so that we have been "distanced" from the aesthetic pleasure

that we seek. "Interpretation" or academic theorizing may have originally set out to bring us close to literature, but it has now driven us away. Sontag calls for what she terms "an erotics of art" — getting back to the practice of experiencing it first hand.

16. The "Chicago School." At its peak in the 1950's, the Chicago school was (as it sometimes called itself) "Neo-Aristotelian." It was interested in "genres" and the implied rules of those genres, and it didn't hesitate to pass judgement on works according to a kind of twentieth-century NEO-CLASSICISM. R.S. Crane, Elder Olson, and others at the University of Chicago "formulated" COMEDY, the novel, and other genres according to laws derived from long traditions of ancient and modern classics. An objection to their approach is not its findings, which often were valid, but rather their unfortunate tone of unimpeachable loftiness. Literary criticism is partly rhetoric — that is, an effort to persuade readers to a point of view that the critic feels is true and salutary. The Chicago School, in this respect, was sometimes against itself.
17. Moralistic. In a way, this group, very active today, is the most quaint or old-fashioned, in its attempt to evaluate literature by its moral position or content. No matter how fine the artistry of the work, the moralistic critic will downgrade it if he feels that it fails to inculcate the "proper" kind of behavior. Perhaps the most extreme example was Thomas Bowdler (d.1825), an Englishman who produced a highly expurgated edition of Shakespeare, removing everything that seemed irreligious or off-color. Such actions raise questions about the morality of the moralistic critic, who would intrude on the freedom to read. This sort of criticism is never absent in any society, from ancient times, with PLATO's censorious *Republic* or Cato the Censor in ancient Rome, to the present day, when school boards might try to keep *The Catcher in the Rye* out of the library.

To return to the idea that everyone is a critic, we have merely to recall that, upon finishing a book (or emerging from a show), we might want to know more about the writer — we are becoming biographical critics. Or we may be interested in the era in which the book was set — historical criticism. Or we may enjoy "psychoanalyzing" the characters — we are psychological critics. Then again, we may compare the book (or movie or TV drama) with others we've seen, especially in terms of recurring, "déjà vu" types of actions and scenes — we are becoming archetypal critics. If we compare the book and the movie made from it, we are in the interdisciplinary school. And so on. In our most casual conversations about art, we can be practicing critics to a greater degree than we may realize. And if we practice several kinds of criticism more or less at the same time, we're merely doing what professionals do — for it's probably impossible to practice any one of the approaches listed above without crossing the line into another one. For example, biographical criticism normally relates to psychological and historical criticism, both of which, in turn, would relate to the New Criticism if there is any attempt to do a "close reading." Probably no criticism is totally free either from impressionism or linguistic concerns. And so forth. The bottom line is that the responsible critic knows all the approaches and will use any of them to get the job done.