

□ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

56

Volume 56

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the
Works of Today's Novelists, Poets,
Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters,
and Other Creative Writers

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Preface

Literary criticism is, by definition, “the art of evaluating or analyzing with knowledge and propriety works of literature.” The complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of the critic especially important to today’s reader. It is the critic who assists the reader in identifying significant new writers, recognizing trends, mastering new terminology, and monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion. Until the publication of the first volume of *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* in 1973, there existed no ongoing digest of current literary opinion. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need.

Scope of the Work

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by today’s creative writers. Each volume of *CLC* includes excerpted criticism on about thirty-five authors who are now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Nearly 2,000 authors have been included since the series began publication. Since many of the writers covered by *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, authors frequently appear in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the dramatization of a literary work as a film or television screenplay. For example, the present volume includes 1980 Nobel Laureate Czesław Miłosz; C. K. Williams, whose poetry collection *Flesh and Blood* won the National Book Critics Circle Award; and Georges Perec, whose novel *Life: A User’s Manual* received much attention from critics and readers. Perhaps most importantly, works that frequently appear on the syllabuses of high school and college literature classes are represented by individual entries in *CLC*; *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger, and *The Time of Your Life*, by William Saroyan, are examples of works of this stature covered in the present volume. Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign writers, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups in the United States.

Format of the Book

Altogether there are about 600 individual excerpts in each volume—with approximately seventeen excerpts per author—taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the authors’ works are also presented. Emphasis has been placed on expanding the sources for criticism by including an increasing number of scholarly and specialized periodicals. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *CLC* supply them with vital information needed to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations facilitate the location of the original source and provide all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **author heading** cites the author’s full name, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. The portion of the name outside parentheses denotes the form under which the author has most commonly published. If an author has written consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any important name variations under which an author has written. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by question marks.
- A **portrait** of the author is included when available.
- A brief **biographical and critical introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the excerpted criticism. However, *CLC* is not intended to be a definitive biographical source. Therefore, *cross-references*

have been included to direct readers to these useful sources published by Gale Research: *Contemporary Authors*, which includes detailed biographical and bibliographical sketches of more than 92,000 authors; *Children's Literature Review*, which presents excerpted criticism on the works of authors of children's books; *Something about the Author*, which contains heavily illustrated biographical sketches of writers and illustrators who create books for children and young adults; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which provides original evaluations and detailed biographies of authors important to literary history; *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, which offers autobiographical essays by prominent writers; and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, which presents autobiographical essays by authors of interest to young readers. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.

- The **excerpted criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing: a particular essay may be descriptive, interpretive, textual, appreciative, comparative, or generic. It may range in form from the brief review to the scholarly exegesis. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The excerpts are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editors' discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- A complete **bibliographical citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book follows each excerpt.

Other Features

- A list of **Authors Forthcoming in *CLC*** previews the authors to be researched for future volumes.
- An **Acknowledgments** section lists the copyright holders who have granted permission to reprint material in this volume of *CLC*. It does not, however, list every book or periodical reprinted or consulted during the preparation of the volume.
- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in *CLC*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, with cross-references to these Gale series: *Short Story Criticism*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, *Contemporary Authors Bibliographical Series*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, *Yesterday's Authors of Books for Children*, and *Authors & Artists for Young Adults*. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, F. Scott Fitzgerald, is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*.
- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which they appear.
- A **Title Index** alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the current volume of *CLC* followed by author's name and the corresponding page numbers where they are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*), the title will also be printed in italics.

- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **special paperbound edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers and will be published with the first volume of *CLC* issued in each calendar year. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easily disposable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation, and is more portable and thus easier to use than was previously possible.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors welcome the comments and suggestions of readers to expand the coverage and enhance the usefulness of the series. Please feel free to contact us by letter or by calling our toll-free number: 1-800-347-GALE.

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Authors Forthcoming in *CLC*

To Be Included in Volume 57

Isabel Allende (Chilean novelist)—In her novels *The House of Spirits*, *Of Love and Shadows*, and the recent *Eva Luna*, Allende combines elements of realism and fantasy to examine the tumultuous social and political history of South America.

Samuel Beckett (Irish-born dramatist and novelist)—A recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Beckett often combines humor and tragedy in his works to create an existential view of the human condition in which life is regarded as meaningless. Beckett's entry will focus on his seminal absurdist drama, *Waiting for Godot*.

T. S. Eliot (English poet, critic, and dramatist)—A principal founder of modernism, Eliot greatly influenced modern letters with his innovative and distinctively erudite verse and criticism. Eliot's entry will focus on *The Waste Land*, an epic widely considered among the major works of twentieth-century poetry.

Percival Everett (American novelist and short story writer)—An author of tragicomic fiction, Everett often focuses upon characters who transcend destructive personal relationships to achieve a sense of self-worth. His novels include *Suder* and *Walk Me to the Distance*.

Richard Greenberg (American dramatist and scriptwriter)—In his plays *The Moderati*, a satire of self-absorbed literary society, and *Eastern Standard*, a critique of young middle-class professionals, Greenberg uses sympathy and humor to explore the American obsession with wealth and materialism.

Danilo Kiš (Yugoslavian novelist and short story writer)—Kiš first attracted critical acclaim in Western countries for his

novels *Garden*, *Ashes* and *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, both of which focus upon the persecution of European Jews during World War II. Kiš's recently translated short story collection, *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, has further enhanced his international reputation.

Peter Klappert (American poet)—Klappert garnered praise for the wit and technical innovations of his first poetry collection, *Lugging Vegetables to Nantucket*, for which he received the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. His sequence *The Idiot Princess of the Last Dynasty* has been compared to such celebrated works as Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*.

Cormac McCarthy (American novelist) —McCarthy is regarded as an important contributor to the Southern Gothic tradition as exemplified by such authors as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor. McCarthy's novels, which are often set in his native Tennessee, are praised for their inventive dialect and powerful examinations of evil.

Mbongeni Ngema (South African dramatist)—Ngema's plays illustrate the consequences of apartheid and humanity's capacity for injustice. His recent musical drama *Sarafina!*, inspired by the Soweto uprising of 1976, chronicles the efforts of South African high school students to fashion a play from their country's tragic history.

Andrei Voznesensky (Russian poet)—A protégé of Boris Pasternak, Voznesensky is one of the Soviet Union's most prestigious contemporary poets. His complex experimental verse reveals a profound love for his country and often explores the alienation of youth in industrial society.

To Be Included in Volume 58

- Fernando Arrabal (Moroccan dramatist and novelist)—Influenced by the Surrealist movement, Arrabal is best known for his macabre plays written in the tradition of the Theater of the Absurd. His works often examine human brutality and sexuality through the perspectives of children.
- Cyrus Colter (American novelist and short story writer)—In his fiction, Colter attempts to bridge the gap he perceives between the experiences of black Americans and the ways in which they have been represented in literature. His deterministic plots emphasize the universality of his middle-class characters and their problems with loneliness, alienation, guilt, and communication.
- Douglas Crase (American poet and critic)—A poet whose first collection, *The Revisionist*, earned high praise, Crase focuses upon the American landscape and such concerns as history and ecology. Critics often compare Crase's bold style to those of Wallace Stevens and Walt Whitman.
- William Golding (English novelist and short story writer)—Winner of the 1983 Nobel Prize in literature, Golding is best known for his novel *The Lord of the Flies*. Commentary in his entry will focus on this allegorical work, which is widely regarded as a powerful psychological and sociological fable about the primal savagery underlying civilized behavior.
- Chester Himes (American short story writer and novelist)—Perhaps best known for *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, one in a series of highly regarded detective novels set in New York that combine irony with biting humor, Himes is considered a valuable contributor to the American tradition of black protest fiction for his vehement portraits of racial oppression and black resistance.
- Joyce Johnson (American novelist, short story writer, and autobiographer)—In her fiction, Johnson often relates her involvement with various members of the 1950s Beat generation, providing a rare female perspective on the era and movement. *Minor Characters*, a revealing, candid memoir of her romance with Jack Kerouac, won the National Book Critics Circle Award.
- Maxine Hong Kingston (American autobiographer, short story writer, and novelist)—In her memoirs, Kingston blends myth, legend, and history to examine her dual heritage as a Chinese American. Kingston's entry will include commentary on *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, a standard text in women's studies courses, as well as *Tripmaster Monkey*, her recent first novel.
- Michael Moorcock (English novelist and editor)—Moorcock is associated with the British "New Wave" literary movement of the 1960s that introduced experimental techniques and a wider range of subject matter to fantasy and science fiction literature.
- Christopher Nolan (Irish poet, short story writer, and autobiographer)—Nolan won wide acclaim for his first collection of poetry, *Dam Burst of Dreams*, and his autobiographical work, *Under the Eye of the Clock*. Nolan often describes his experiences as a paralyzed mute in an exhilarating prose style, which has been compared to that of James Joyce for its use of Celtic-styled alliteration and invented words.
- Alice Walker (American novelist, poet, and essayist)—Regarded as an important chronicler of African-American life, Walker is best known for her novel *The Color Purple*, for which she received the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. Commentary in this entry will focus on Walker's recent novel *The Temple of My Familiar*, which concerns the multiple lives of a reincarnated woman.

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Peter Barnes

1931-

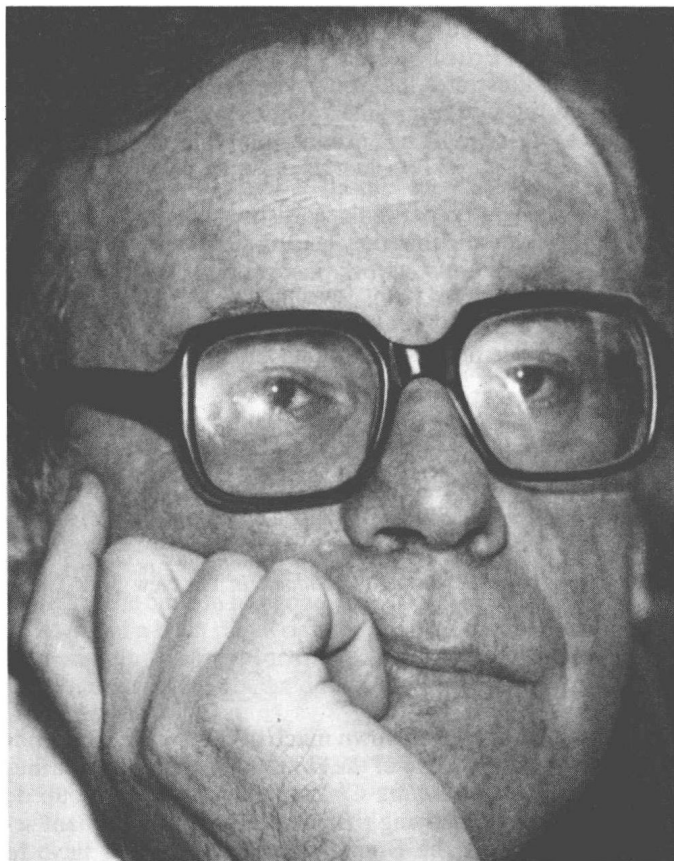
English dramatist, scriptwriter, editor, and critic.

In his plays, Barnes combines farce and slapstick with witty dialogue to create social commentaries that often mock the British class system. Barnes integrates such diverse elements as opera, historical tragedy, musical comedy, modern slang, and literary allusions, adopting expansive settings and manic plots to evoke the vacuousness and absurdity that he believes are inherent in upper-class contemporary society. Bernard F. Dukore observed: "Barnes juggles the audience's moods and enables them to examine critically, detached and with a smile, the social values and attitudes he scrutinizes." While occasionally faulting Barnes's works as undisciplined and excessive, critics have commended his creative manipulation of language.

Barnes wrote several plays in the early 1960s, including *The Time of the Barracudas* (1963) and *Sclerosis* (1965), but first received significant critical attention for *The Ruling Class* (1968), a satire on the manners and customs of the British upper class. This work revolves around the fourteenth Earl of Gurney, a paranoid schizophrenic named Jack who believes he is Jesus Christ. Jack's pontifications on love, tolerance, and humility appall his elitist family, who attempt to cure him of his delusion. When they finally succeed, Jack reacts by adopting the persona of Jack the Ripper. Murdering lower-class women and exercising censorious justice, Jack becomes an accepted member of his family and the House of Lords. Although Barnes's swift comedic transitions puzzled several critics, many lauded his colorful imagery. Julius Novick asserted: "[Barnes] is a good hater. His work expresses a visceral loathing and disgust for the entrenchments of national feeling, such as no American playwright has been able to equal; and this loathing, expressed in vivid images of madness, gives his work an undeniable power."

Barnes's next two works, *Leonardo's Last Supper* (1969) and *Noonday Demons* (1969), are one-act plays that were originally presented as a joint production. These pieces were intended as allegories affirming the power of egoism over altruism. Set during the Italian Renaissance, *Leonardo's Last Supper* involves a middle-class family that yearns for the wealth and authority of the elite. To acquire these advantages, they kill Leonardo da Vinci and receive a tremendous burial commission. *Noonday Demons* concerns two fourth-century hermits who argue over the severity of their anguish, each insisting that he has suffered the most for God. *The Bewitched* (1974) chronicles the search for a successor to the throne of Spain at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Reiterating Barnes's vexation with the aristocracy, this farce focuses on Carlos II, the country's inept leader, whose many weaknesses precipitated the War of the Spanish Succession.

In *Laughter!* (1978), which examines malice, Barnes seeks to demonstrate that laughter merely evades life's disconcerting truths rather than alleviating human misery. The first act of *Laughter!* explores capricious cruelty through a darkly humorous account of Ivan the Terrible's reign in Russia during the sixteenth century, while the second act, set in a concen-



tration camp, illustrates how human brutality has evolved into deliberate, organized madness. Barnes's depiction of Auschwitz includes tap-dancing inmates who tell jokes while being gassed to death. Regarded as Barnes's most controversial work, *Laughter!* was condemned by critics who interpreted the play as a mockery of the Holocaust. *Red Noses*, written in 1978 but first performed in 1985, also questions the true purpose of laughter. To try to ease despair over the Black Plague, the ruling class of medieval Britain authorizes a monk to assemble a comedy troupe, the Red Noses, to amuse the dying populace. Their comedic success does not lessen the anguish, however, and the company eventually realizes that it has been used by the state to avoid vital issues and concerns of the ill-fated proletariat. Although English critics contended that Barnes's themes were becoming redundant, *Red Noses* garnered praise from American reviewers.

Besides writing his own plays, Barnes has adapted and edited the works of other authors, most notably those of the seventeenth-century Jacobean dramatist Ben Jonson. He has also contributed scripts to British radio and television and has written several screenplays, including the film version of *The Ruling Class*.

(See also *CLC*, Vol. 5; *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 65-68; and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 13.)

IRVING WARDLE

Hanging judges, blood-sports enthusiasts and birch-wielding matrons are among the favorite targets of British satirists, but they have never prompted anything quite as wild as Peter Barnes's *The Ruling Class*. . . .

Although you might not notice it under the flood of extravagant fantasy, which takes in everything from Italian opera to melodramatic parody, the play is obsessively concerned with the tradition of British violence sanctioned by the upper class. Mr. Barnes illustrates it through the story of the 14th Earl of Gurney, released from a mental home to be married off and shut up again once he has produced an heir to the title.

The Earl, however, sees himself as Jesus Christ; and so scandalized is the family (particularly Bishop Gurney) at his priapic brand of worship that they confront him with a rival messiah. The trick seems to work: instead of preaching love, he now makes acceptable public speeches on discipline and punishment. In the setting of the Gurney mansion and the House of Lords no one notices that he has now changed into Jack the Ripper.

So loaded is this fable with vaudeville routines and fusillades of gags, that the audience is often left panting in the rear. But . . . Mr. Barnes has volcanic powers of comic invention and is one of God's gifts to actors.

Irving Wardle, "The Ruling Class", *Satire on Violence, Staged in London*, in *The New York Times*, February 28, 1969, p. 31.

YORICK BLUMENFELD

With Parliament bogged down much of this spring in an endless debate on the reform of the House of Lords, Peter Barnes hoped that his *The Ruling Class* might deliver the coup de grace. There is no denying that this comedy is a brilliant sequence of gibes at the Establishment. One would have to search far afield for anyone who could flog an old horse better than Mr. Barnes—but then the British are renowned as flagellists. In the program note to *The Ruling Class* Barnes condemns "the deadly servitude of naturalism." What he strives for is a dramatic reality of "opposites where everything is simultaneously tragic and ridiculous."

The Ruling Class opens as the thirteenth Earl of Gurney, a hanging judge, is taking his evening exercise dressed in a tutu. He climbs a stepladder over his ancestral bed and puts the hangman's noose around his neck. Usually this bit of eroticism is followed by a whiskey and soda. This time, however, he slips, and his butler finds him swiveling for real. He is succeeded by Jack, the fourteenth Earl of Gurney. . . . Jack is a certified lunatic who proclaims that he's the Trinity. When asked why he thinks he is God, Gurney answers: "When I pray to Him I find I am talking to myself." Indeed, while the card-carrying Communist butler pours tea, his nibs raves happily from a wooden cross preaching love, sex, and tolerance. The ruling class, according to Barnes, rejects Gurney's beatitudes as a cold, mean, greedy, and thoroughly self-absorbed group.

When confronted by another madman, a Scot who also believes himself to be God, the fourteenth Earl really goes mad. He remembers that there is also a God of wrath and transforms himself into Jack the Ripper, slashing away at the aristocratic Establishment. This time, however, he is regarded as

eminently sane by society. Gurney, addressing the crutch- and earphone-filled debating chamber of a decrepit House of Lords, denounces fornication and homosexuality. Eulogizing the hangman, Gurney is applauded by the honorable assemblage.

But what is Barnes really saying? The cornerstone of English society is certainly not the public hangman. And contrary to his derogatory satire, the Lords have been in the very forefront of reform: abolishing the death penalty and liberalizing the laws on homosexuality which the popularly elected chamber of Parliament was loath to discuss. The implication is that conservatism, or the safeguarding of the traditions of the past, is madness. If this is indeed Barnes's message, then it is a grave oversimplification.

The critics hailed *The Ruling Class* as "uproariously funny." They hardly seemed perturbed by the savagery of its neo-Jacobean ridicule. However, if Barnes had been attacking only a heraldic Britain which exists solely in tourist brochures, would the audiences have found it so funny? It seems anomalous that the upper-class attendance at the theater should titter so nervously about its social standing when darts have been thrown at it for so many decades. The welfare state is now a generation old, the *Times* is no longer the stuffy representative of a wooden culture. And yet Peter Barnes writes as if nothing had happened. (pp. 99-100)

Yorick Blumenfeld, "The London Show," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 224, No. 2, August, 1969, pp. 99-101.

JULIUS NOVICK

"Alienation," somebody has remarked, "is when your country's in a war and you want the other side to win." It is no secret that many Americans, including a particularly large number of artists and intellectuals, are becoming alienated in this sense. . . . Many people, inspired by a revulsion against the [Vietnam] war, are moving toward a deep and wide rejection of our country; if we have done *this*, they feel, we must be a corrupt and evil nation, and corruption and evil must be deeply rooted in our national past.

In the theater, the two most significant expressions of this feeling have been Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope* and Arthur Kopit's *Indians*. . . . *The Ruling Class* expresses a similar revulsion toward the national traditions and patriotic attitudes of our allies and friends in Great Britain. As the title indicates, Barnes concentrates his scorn on the aristocracy, but he seems to feel that this class still retains its power, and that it has shaped the tradition of British nationhood.

The hero of *The Ruling Class* is "the Queen's trusty and right well-beloved cousin" Jack, the fourteenth Earl of Gurney, who is a paranoid schizophrenic. Jack is convinced that he is not Jack but God, and that God is love. He is a friendly, mellifluous, and harmless madman, but his family finds his madness intolerable. They try to effect a cure by confronting him, in a scene of genuine horror, with a ferocious Scots madman named McKyle, who insists that *he* is God. Clearly they can't both be God, and the Earl yields, apparently cured.