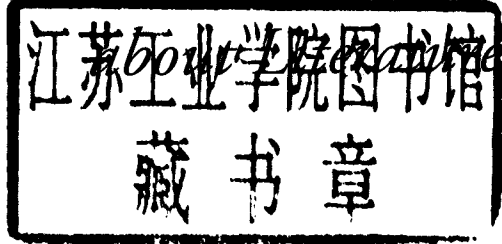




# Learning for a Diverse World

*Using Critical Theory  
to Read and Write*



LOIS TYSON

03001593

Published in 2001 by  
Routledge  
29 West 35th Street  
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by  
Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane  
London EC4P 4EE

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tyson, Lois, 1950–

Learning for a diverse world : using critical theory to read and write about literature by Lois Tyson

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8153-3773-6 — ISBN 0-8153-3774-4 (pbk.)

1. Criticism. 2. Critical theory. I. Title.

PN98.S6 T97 2001

801'95—dc21

00-047061

For Mac Davis and the late Stephen Lacey,  
who both know that a good teacher is one who remains a student.

## Preface for Instructors

If you're planning to use this book in your undergraduate classroom, then you know that critical theory is no longer considered an abstract discipline for a select group of graduate students, as it was fifteen or twenty years ago. Personally, I don't think critical theory should ever have been limited to that mode of thinking or to that audience. In its most concrete and, I think, most meaningful form, critical theory supplies us with a remarkable collection of pedagogical tools to help students, regardless of their educational background, develop their ability to reason logically; to formulate an argument; to grasp divergent points of view; to make connections among literature, history, and their own experience; and, of special importance on our shrinking planet, to explore human diversity in its most profound and personal sense: as diverse ways of defining oneself and one's world. From this perspective, critical theory is an appropriate pedagogical resource not only for advanced literature courses, but for the kinds of meat-and-potatoes courses that many of us teach: foundation-level literature courses; introduction-to-literary-studies courses; diversity courses; and composition courses that stress critical thinking, social issues, or cultural diversity.

For most of us who see this pedagogical potential, the question then becomes: How can I adapt critical theory to make it useful to students new to the study of literature and/or to the social issues literature raises? That is precisely the question *Learning for a Diverse World* attempts to answer, first by offering you six carefully selected theories from which to choose, then by offering you five different ways to use each of these theories through the vehicle of sample interpretations of the five literary works reprinted at the end of this book. Now, the key word here is *choice*. I think we do our best teaching when we adapt our materials to our own pedagogical goals and teaching styles. For example, you can use *Learning for a Diverse World* to

structure an entire course, or you can use it as a supplement. To provide maximum flexibility, each chapter is written to stand on its own, so you can choose which of the selected theories you want to use. Each sample interpretation is also written to stand on its own, so you can choose which of the selected literary works you want to use.

Chapters Three through Eight—which introduce the fundamentals of, respectively, psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist, gay and lesbian, African American, and postcolonial theory—each consists of four components: (1) “Why Should We Learn about This Theory?” (2) “Basic Concepts,” (3) “Interpretation Exercises,” and (4) “Food for Further Thought.” “Why Should We Learn about This Theory?” explains the importance of the theory addressed in the chapter at hand and its relevance to our lives as well as to our interpretation of literature. “Basic Concepts” defines the foundational concepts of that theory in simple, concrete language. “Interpretation Exercises” uses those foundational concepts to analyze our five literary works. And “Food for Further Thought” helps students both retain and understand the significance of what they’ve just learned in that chapter.

I hope the structure of these chapters will facilitate your own creation of classroom activities and homework assignments. For example, students can work in small groups to find the textual data required by a given interpretation exercise, and that activity can be organized in a number of ways. Each group can work on a different section of the same interpretation exercise, thereby each contributing a piece of the puzzle to a single interpretation. Or each group can work on a different interpretation exercise from a single chapter, thereby using concepts from the same theory to complete interpretation exercises for different literary works. Or if students feel they fully understand a given interpretation exercise, you might invite them to develop one of the alternative interpretations suggested in the “Focusing Your Essay” section at the end of each interpretation exercise or to develop an interpretation of their own. Finally, once the class has become acquainted with a few different theories, each group can collect textual data from the same literary work as directed by the sample interpretations of that work offered in different chapters, that is, through different theoretical lenses.

Similarly, the “Basic Concepts” sections of Chapters Three through Eight can be used to generate activities by having students apply these concepts to short literary works other than those used in this book. For example, students can be given—singly, in pairs, or in small groups—one of the basic concepts of a single theory and be asked to find all the ways in which that concept is illustrated in or is relevant to any literary work you assign. Or you

might allow students to select one of the basic concepts of a theory the class is studying and explain to their classmates how an understanding of that concept helps illuminate the lyrics of a song of their own choosing, which students can bring to class in recorded or printed form. You might also find it fruitful to have small groups of students brainstorm possible activities—to be submitted for your approval—by means of which they believe they can demonstrate the usefulness of one or more of the basic concepts of a given theory in helping them understand something about their world: perhaps something they saw in the news, on a television program, or in an advertisement; or perhaps something they observed about human behavior while at their jobs, while on campus, or while shopping at the mall.

To whatever uses you put Chapters Three through Eight, I think you'll find that the six theories they introduce, taken in any combination, provide a *comparative* experience, a sense of how our perceptions can change when we change the lens through which we're looking. In addition, these theories, all of which are in popular academic use today, can help students develop a concrete, productive understanding of the diverse world in which we live. Analogously, our five literary works—Emily Dickinson's "I started Early—took my Dog" (c. 1862), William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1931), Ralph Ellison's "The Battle Royal" (1952), Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" (1973), and Jewelle Gomez's "Don't Explain" (1987)—were chosen because each lends itself to our selected theories in ways that are accessible to novices. Each of these works is also typical of the kinds of perspectives on literature each theory offers us. Thus each interpretation exercise serves as a template for future literary analysis.

Of course, *Learning for a Diverse World* is not intended as a complete introduction-to-literature textbook: for example, it does not define such basic literary vocabulary as *plot*, *character*, *setting*, and *imagery*. Nevertheless, the book addresses several common problems encountered by students new to the study of literature, problems which I suspect you've encountered in the classroom many times. For example, the interpretation exercises in Chapters Three through Eight, in addition to their primary function as sample literary applications of our selected theories, are all lessons in close reading, for each exercise guides students through the process of collecting textual evidence to support the interpretation at hand. Students are thus encouraged to see the equal importance of two aspects of current critical practice that they often mistakenly believe are mutually exclusive: (1) that there is more than one valid interpretation of a literary text and (2) that every interpretation requires adequate textual support. Unfortunately, as

you've probably noticed all too often, the idea that there is no single correct interpretation of a literary work frequently leads students to conclude that their own interpretations do not need to be supported with textual evidence. Furthermore, Chapter One, "Critical Theory and You," explains, among other things, the difference between an opinion and a thesis, the purpose of a literary interpretation, and how we can analyze the meaning of a literary work without knowing what the author intended. Chapter Two, "Using Concepts from Reader-Response Theory to Understand Our Own Interpretations," explains the difference between a symbolic interpretation justified by the literary work and a symbolic interpretation arbitrarily imposed by a reader's personal response to the work. This same chapter also explains the difference between a text's representation of human behavior and its endorsement of that behavior, which students' personal responses to a literary work often lead them to confuse. Finally, Chapter Nine, "Holding on to What You've Learned," explains how the concepts from critical theory we use to interpret literature can be used to interpret other cultural productions as well—for example, television programs, political speeches, song lyrics, movies, and the like—and how our study of critical theory can help us understand, develop, and articulate our personal values.

Perhaps you will find, as I have, that this last connection—between our sense of ourselves as individuals and the culture that shapes us—is the most valuable connection the study of critical theory can help students make. For it is a connection that has the capacity to spark imaginative inquiry in every domain of their education. And it seems to me that few things motivate students more thoroughly—if we can just find the keys to open that door—than their own imaginations.



## Acknowledgments

My sincere gratitude goes to the following friends and colleagues for their many and varied acts of kindness during the writing of this book: Forrest Armstrong, Kathleen Blumreich, Brent Chesley, Patricia Clark, Dianne Griffin Crowder, Michelle DeRose, Milt Ford, Roger Gilles, Chance Guyette, Michael Hartnett, Avis Hewitt, Rick Iadonisi, Mitch Kachun, Tori Kragt, Stephen Lacey, Paul Pierrentozzi, Regina Salmi, Veta Tucker, Becky Westrate, and Brian White.

Special thanks also go to Dean Gary Stark and to Grand Valley State University for its generous financial support of this project; to Sharon Piersma and Mary Mihovich at Grand Haven's Loutit Library; and to my editors at Routledge, James Morgan III and Angela Kao.

Finally, the deepest appreciation is expressed to Gretchen Cline and Mac Davis for their extreme courage, as always, under fire.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Critical Theory and You

If you're reading this textbook, then you've probably got a lot on your plate right now. You might be in your first or second year of college. You might be taking your first literature course. If you're majoring in English, at this point you might be a bit concerned about what you've gotten yourself into. If you're not majoring in English, you might be wondering if you can get away with skipping this part of the course or putting forth a minimal effort. After all, you might be thinking, "What does critical theory have to do with me?" As I hope this book will show you, critical theory has everything to do with you, no matter what your major or your career plans might be.

### **What Does Critical Theory Have to Do with Me?**

First, most of my students find that the study of critical theory increases their ability to think creatively and to reason logically, and that's a powerful combination of vocational skills. You will see, for example, how the skills fostered by studying critical theory would be useful to lawyers in arguing their cases and to teachers in managing the interpersonal dynamics that play out in their classrooms. In fact, as you read the following chapters I think you will find that critical theory develops your ability to see any given problem from a variety of points of view, which is a skill worth having *no matter what career you pursue*.

As important as, if not more important than, your future role on the job market is your future role as a citizen of the United States and as a member of the global community. Many Americans are beginning to

realize that the United States, like the planet as a whole, consists of diverse cultures, each with its own history of struggle and achievement and each with its own part to play on the modern stage of national and world events. However, while each culture has its own unique heritage, we share the need to learn to live together, to learn to work with and for one another, if we want our country and our planet to survive. And the issue becomes more complex when we realize that cultures don't occupy tidy bins determined by race or ethnicity alone. In reality, cultures consist of a patchwork of overlapping groups that define themselves in terms of many factors, including race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class.

It's easy for each of us to think ourselves tolerant of cultural groups other than our own, to believe that we are unbiased, without prejudice. But it's not meaningful to say that we are tolerant of groups about which we know nothing. For as soon as our tolerance is tested we might find that the tolerance we thought we had doesn't really exist. For example, think back to your high school experience. For most of you, wasn't your high school divided into social groups based largely on the kinds of cultural factors listed above? If your school had a diverse student body, didn't students tend to form *close* bonds only with members of their own race? Didn't students from wealthy, socially prominent families tend to stick together? Didn't students from poorer neighborhoods tend to hang around together as well? Didn't students with strong religious ties tend to be *close* friends with students of the same religion? If your high-school environment was safe enough for gay students to identify themselves, wasn't there a social group based on gay sexual orientation, which may have been subdivided into two more groups: gay male and gay female students? You can see the strength of these cultural ties if your school had athletic teams made up of students from diverse backgrounds. The athletes may have bonded with their teammates at school, but how many of them formed *close* out-of-school friendships with athletes of a different race, class, or sexual orientation?

Of course, it seems natural for us to form close ties with people who share our cultural background because we have so much in common. The unfortunate thing is that we tend to form only superficial relationships, or none at all, with people from other cultural groups. And worse, we tend to classify other groups according to misleading stereotypes that prevent us from getting to know one another as individuals. We might even find ourselves looking at members of another group as if



they were creatures from another planet, “not like us” and therefore not as good, not as trustworthy, and in worst-case scenarios, not as human. One solution to this problem is to begin to understand one another by learning to see the world from diverse points of view, by learning what it might be like to “walk a mile in another person’s moccasins.” And though it might sound like a big claim, that is precisely what critical theory can help us learn because it teaches us to see the world from multiple perspectives.

Naturally, critical theory has specific benefits for English majors and other students of literature, too. For example, critical theory can increase your understanding of literary texts by helping you see more in them than you’ve seen before. And by giving you more to see in literature, critical theory can make literature more interesting to read. As you’ll see in the following chapters, critical theory can also provide you with multiple interpretations of the same literary work, which will increase the possibility of finding interesting paper topics. Finally, a practice that is increasing in popularity in English departments is the application of critical theory to cultural productions other than literature—for example, to movies, song lyrics, and television shows—and even to your own personal experience, which will help you see more and understand more of the world in which you live.

## **What Will I Learn about Critical Theory from This Book?**

So now that I’ve been trying to convince you of the value of critical theory for the last several paragraphs, perhaps it’s time to explain in some detail what critical theory is. If you’ve looked at the table of contents of this textbook, you’ve probably discovered that what is commonly called *critical theory* actually consists of several critical theories. And what is most interesting is that each one offers us a different way of interpreting human experience and literature, and literature is, of course, a human production. Each theory focuses our attention on a different area of human experience—and therefore on a different aspect of literature—and gives us its own set of concepts with which to understand the world in which we live and the literature that is part and parcel of our world. Think of each theory as a different lens or a different pair of eyeglasses through which we see a different picture of the world and a different view of any literary text we read. To help you get a feel for how