

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 244

Volume 244

Contemporary Literary Criticism

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



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Contemporary Literary Criticism

Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented 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 adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

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 authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews 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 author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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Diane Johnson

1934-

American novelist, essayist, biographer, screenwriter, and nonfiction writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Johnson's career through 2004. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 5, 13, and 48.

INTRODUCTION

A critically acclaimed writer whose works have been nominated for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize on several occasions, Johnson is noted for her sophisticated, witty novels about intelligent yet emotionally insecure women who are dissatisfied with their lives. In her career of over forty years to date, Johnson has produced a body of work that has invited comparisons to that of Edith Wharton and Henry James and which reflects her various travels in and outside of the United States.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Johnson was born and raised in Illinois before relocating to California for about twenty years before establishing residency in France. Johnson's first marriage, in 1953, produced four children; she married her second husband, a research physician and professor, in 1968. She earned a B.A. from the University of Utah in 1957. She then received an M.A. in 1966 and a Ph.D. in English in 1968, both from the University of California, and remained with the school after graduation, serving as a professor of English at the Davis campus until 1987. During this time, she published six novels, a screenplay, and several works of nonfiction, including the biography *Lesser Lives* (1973) and the novel *Lying Low* (1978), both of which earned National Book Award nominations. She additionally released the essay collection *Terrorists and Novelists* (1982) and the novel *Persian Nights* (1987), which were each nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. The remainder of Johnson's work during this period received retrospective critical attention as her reputation grew. Johnson and her husband live primarily in Paris, spending a few months each year in California. The author has noted that she has never felt completely at home since childhood. In an interview with Carolyn

A. Durham, she remarked, "Like other midwesterners, once I left the Midwest and its very nourishing and womblike atmosphere of certitude, I felt a bit like a stranger. . . . That probably makes me a natural travel writer."

MAJOR WORKS

Johnson published her first novel, *Fair Game* (1965), while still a college student. This work and her next two publications, *Loving Hands at Home* (1968) and *Burning* (1971), were characterized by some critics as feminist works. Johnson has explained that the novels were not intended to promote a political message but do share a focus on central female characters facing life-altering decisions. *Lesser Lives*, a biography of Mary Ellen Peacock Nicolls Meredith, the first wife of English novelist and poet George Meredith, demonstrates Johnson's interest in a woman's perspective on relationships and the workings of society. Johnson has noted that she wrote this book as her first marriage was ending, a circumstance that encouraged her to investigate Mary Ellen's mostly unknown story further. Johnson added detective fiction to her oeuvre with the novel *The Shadow Knows* (1974) and examined the genre from a different angle with her biography of mystery writer Dashiell Hammett in 1983. Johnson was the first authorized biographer of Hammett, and her book was praised for bringing new biographical information about the author to light. The essay collection *Terrorists and Novelists* presents Johnson's views on a range of topics, including critical treatment of female authors, commentary that again linked Johnson with the feminist cause. The collection includes book reviews and other nonfiction pieces originally published in such periodicals as the *New York Review of Books* and *New York Times Book Review*. Her 1987 novel *Persian Nights* follows a group of apathetic Americans living in Iran before its 1979 revolution and examines, among other themes, the question of whether Westerners are capable of understanding Islam.

With *Natural Opium* (1993), Johnson reveals herself to be an uncomfortable, though tolerant, world traveler. Her observations in this book pre-date her relocation to Paris and reflect the author's often-harsh realizations of how life is different in various parts of the

world—especially for Americans who travel or eventually live outside the United States. This book and her next three novels display the influence of her personal life at the time they were written: the travels of *Natural Opium* were precipitated by her future husband's work assignments; they married and, with each passing year, have spent more of their time in Paris. *Into a Paris Quartier: Reine Margot's Chapel and Other Haunts of St.-Germain* (2005) is a nonfiction work that reflects her growing affection for her life abroad.

Le Divorce (1997), *Le Mariage* (2000), and *L'Affaire* (2003) are often discussed as a loose trilogy: few of the characters reappear and the storyline is not carried from one book to the next, but their settings and thematic style, as comedies of manners, are similar. Johnson's reflections on Paris and other European locales in which the stories are set have also been of interest to critics. The books are written in English but feature heavy usage of French phrases. In *Le Divorce*, a young American woman travels to France to visit her sister and arrives just as the sister's husband initiates divorce proceedings. *Le Mariage* follows two French-American couples, the soon-to-be-married Tim and Anne-Sophie and the illicit lovers Antoine and Clara. The heroine of *L'Affaire* is again a young American woman, this time a rich beneficiary of the dot-com boom years, whose well-intended meddling in European affairs creates havoc.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Reflecting upon her own career in an interview with Carolyn A. Durham, Johnson has argued that she perceives her critical and popular reception in America as very different than in Europe. She has considered herself largely ignored in Europe, particularly in France despite her residency there. Johnson has told Durham that she does not think of herself as writing for both an American and a European audience "because I have very little expectation that Europeans will read these books. They do come out in French, but I'm not sure that anyone reads them." Another area where Johnson's self-perception has conflicted with that of critics is in her portrayal of women. For example, *The Shadow Knows* has been generally well received by critics, although their interpretation of the female protagonist, N., as hysterical to varying degrees surprised Johnson, who has stated that she wrote N. as a straightforward and objective reporter. Conversely, critics have at times found feminist agendas in Johnson's writing that the author maintains were unintentional. While readers have maintained strong approval of the characters and their foibles as presented with wit and insight in Johnson's fiction,

some critics have suggested that the true central characters of *Le Divorce*, *Le Mariage*, and *L'Affaire* are not people but rather countries: France and the U.S., whose mutually baffling relationship the author examines through interactions among citizens of each.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Fair Game (novel) 1965
Loving Hands at Home (novel) 1968
Burning (novel) 1971
Lesser Lives: The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith (biography) 1973; also published as *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives*
The Shadow Knows (novel) 1974
Lying Low (novel) 1978
The Shining [with Stanley Kubrick; adapted from the novel by Stephen King] (screenplay) 1980
Terrorists and Novelists (essays) 1982
Dashiell Hammett: A Life (biography) 1983
Persian Nights (novel) 1987
Health and Happiness (novel) 1990
Natural Opium: Some Travelers' Tales (nonfiction) 1993
Le Divorce (novel) 1997
Le Mariage (novel) 2000
L'Affaire (novel) 2003
Into a Paris Quartier: Reine Margot's Chapel and Other Haunts of St.-Germain (nonfiction) 2005

CRITICISM

Michael Hulse (review date 27 March 1993)

SOURCE: Hulse, Michael. "It Is Better to Travel Hopelessly." *Spectator* 270, no. 8594 (27 March 1993): 35.

[In the following review, Hulse discusses the irony of a travelogue, *Natural Opium*, that is written by an author who apparently despises travel.]

'I am not fond of travel in the best of circumstances,' the American novelist Diane Johnson tells us in the first of [*Natural Opium*'s] ten travel tales. She would agree with Touchstone, who said, 'when I was at home, I was in a better place'. Johnson, for whom home is San Francisco, defines travel as 'inconvenient displacements punctuated by painful longings to be

home'. She feels that 'one is never such a snob as when travelling', and roundly declares: 'Widespread travel encourages deepest misanthropy.' In that case, why does she do it?

The short answer is that her partner, J, is a consultant to the International Infectious Disease Council, and the invitations he receives to foreign parts regularly tempt Johnson away from home, despite her misgivings. So in the first narrative she and J escape commitments to take a cruise to the Great Barrier Reef. She detests the cabin, which is 'unimaginably small', with 'two foam mattresses on pallets suspended from the wall, and a smell.' She detests the Australian tourists, who 'spoke in this accent I disliked, as if their vowels had been slammed in doors'. She detests the tinned peas. She detests the boat's itinerary, island to island and souvenir shop to souvenir shop:

Statuettes of drunken sailors, velvet pictures of island maidens, plastic seashell lamps made in Taiwan. What contempt the people who think up souvenirs have for other people.

All this naturally makes for first-rate reading. Nothing is quite so enjoyable as sitting comfortably at home reading about the discomfort of other people's travels.

But Johnson has a plot and an agenda. The plot is a romantic one: at this point she is still wondering if she should marry J (to which the reader is tempted to reply, with Woody Allen, not if he won't tell you the other letters in his name.) The agenda is something to do with dark nights of the soul and how to get through them. Her biliousness deepens into anti-social depression:

It was more than the irritability of a shallow, difficult person demanding comfort, it was a failure of spirit.

But by the end of this narrative, on the reef, she has come to like her fellow-passengers, foibles and vowels and all, and is transformed into a creature newly aglow with love of humanity—particularly J (Reader, she marries him.)

This movement towards self-knowledge and acceptance of others is Diane Johnson's characteristic groundplan. It is the longer, moralistic explanation of her willingness to travel despite herself. What could seem didactic is never a bore, though. Johnson is sharp, warm, waspish and tender by turns, and has a gift for pace, insight and the grotesque that makes *Natural Opium* a delight.

In Switzerland, thoughtless hosts pressure their guests to take a dangerous after-dinner sledge ride in the dark, and Johnson comes unstuck:

I tumbled, flailing, down a steep slope . . . and landed head first against the bare branches of a small tree.

In Egypt she is scandalised by loudmouthed Congressmen at the next table: 'This is your typical Egypt. Smells like donkey pee and there's nothing to eat.' In Thailand, India, China and South Africa, as she ricochets from vexation to mortification, her eye is as exact as her judgment. The Bangkok air is 'smudgy, red and neon in the night'. Like E. M. Forster she notes that 'the sedulous hospitality of Asians had an underside. It made a claim on you.' At a South African lodge she realises that the morning chambermaid is one of the evening's topless dancers:

It was terrible to think that the poor girl, tired after the day, had to take her clothes off and jiggle up and down for tourists.

Johnson's is a reporter's eye but a novelist's style:

The French are now speaking of auto-fiction, by which the teller of true stories avails herself of the rights of the novelist to pace the account.

We needn't care what the French call it if the writing is as good as Johnson's. In her last narrative, about killings among Utah Mormons, she is on home ground, and confronts her second main subject beside the getting of personal wisdom: America. It is a

rough, wild country, not so different today from a hundred years ago, with peculiar customs, suspicious tribes, sinister religions, and inhospitable regions in which a poorly prepared traveller can die.

America, deeply loved, is subjected to realistic assessment:

You often hear of people coming to America with joyful hearts, to find only the chill of air-conditioning in high-rise buildings, or the cockroaches of transient hotels.

Travelling 'to the end of the world' (as seen from San Francisco), or at the very least 'beyond dentistry', turns out to be a pursuit of an answer to a simple question: 'Where might you go to be loved, where did they love Americans?' But then, where does anyone go to be loved but home?

Alain de Botton (review date 18 January 1997)

SOURCE: de Botton, Alain. "The Last Time I Saw Paris . . ." *Spectator* 278, no. 8790 (18 January 1997): 34.

[In the following review, de Botton remarks on the amplitude of clichés in Johnson's characterization of France in *Le Divorce*.]

As the interior decorators of the Dôme and Café Rouge restaurants have discovered, it isn't hard to evoke a French atmosphere. All you need is a Robert Doisneau poster, an old wine bottle with candle, a *Daily Express* on a stick, a basket of baguette and a waiter gruffly inquiring, 'Monsieur, mey aa tik yur erder please.' Thereafter, you can almost hope the customers will forget they're in the Pinner Cafay Rewge, not the Deux Magots.

It seems the author of *Le Divorce* has learnt a few tricks from such canny restaurateurs. First there's the novel's title, the *Le* positively radiating Frenchness (echoes of Le Shuttle and Le Club, Air France's new business class). Every chapter is headed with a quote (only tenuously connected to the story) by the greats of French literature; La Rochefoucauld is there to tell us, 'There are good marriages, but no delightful ones,' Rabelais remarks that, 'Appetite comes with eating,' and even Pascal is at hand with his, 'The heart has its reasons, that reason will never know.'

The heroine of *Le Divorce* is a 20-something Californian girl, Isabel Walker, who travels to Paris to visit her older sister Roxy, Roxy's French husband, Charles-Henri and their little girl. She arrives to find that Charles-Henri has walked out and initiated *le divorce* proceedings alluded to in the title. The novel follows Isabel's attempt to understand events between her sister and brother-in-law, as well as her initiation into Parisian life, her acquaintance with Charles-Henri's family, her friendship with wealthy ex-pat Americans and her affairs with a succession of Frenchmen.

Whatever the apparent plot, Diane Johnson's real interest lies in looking at French life through the eyes of an American, the central characters in the book being France and America. The portrait is hardly subtle. Johnson cheerfully subscribes to every known cliché about French life: characters eat a lot of cheese with funny names, are called Marie-Odile and Jean-Fernand, an Oncle Edgar has 'the nose of a Vichy general,' we hear of 'big-leaved trees and bookstalls along the Seine,' while the dialogue is splattered with 'Mais oui,' 'Mais non,' and 'Mais bien sur.' When Isabel goes to a restaurant with her lover, Yves, she watches in horror as France orders a *pavé au poivre*, *saignant* before America dutifully settles for a fat-free sole and steamed vegetables. For those unacquainted with the French capital, we are even offered some helpful, guide-book-like moments:

The Flore is right on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, amid tourists drinking espresso and regulars reading *Libération*.

More awkwardly, Johnson has a fondness for the kind of sweeping sociological verdicts one might overhear on a homebound TWA but rarely find in print: 'French-

men are spoiled by their mothers,' 'There is a huge dogshit problem in Paris,' 'French people will tell an American things they wouldn't tell each other,' 'In France, you just put up with the way men are,' and even, 'In France, at any awkward point in the conversation, the subject reverts to food.'

Even so, the novel is not an unpleasant read. The Californian heroine isn't as annoying as she might be (despite the occasional: 'Paris was kind of promising . . .'), and the plot keeps the reader turning the pages. In fact, it might be just the thing to pass a few lazy afternoons with, while smoking a packet of Gitanes, drinking a bottle of Beaujolais, snacking on a plate of *pommes frites* and wearing a beret, at a corner table of the local Café Rouge.

Gabriele Annan (review date 18 November 2000)

SOURCE: Annan, Gabriele. "A French Connection." *Spectator* 285, no. 8989 (18 November 2000): 57.

[In the following review, Annan describes *Le Mariage* as "Johnson-lite" and recommends instead Johnson's earlier novel *Lying Low*.]

Le Mariage is a sequel, sort of, to Diane Johnson's last novel *Le Divorce*. The Persand family, impeccably *bon chic, bon genre*, with flats in Paris and an estate in week-ending distance, play a major role in the first, but only a minor one in the second. The inverse order of the titles—divorce before marriage—is characteristic of Johnson's penchant, if not to *épater le bourgeois*, then at least to *étonner le lecteur*. But the couples in the two novels are not the same: it's just a *jeu d'esprit*. Dropping French phrases must be infectious.

Like *Le Divorce*, *Le Mariage* can be read as a light-hearted but perceptive social guidebook for Americans in France. It explains French mind-sets, customs, manners, food, clothes and law and charmingly persuades you that it's getting it all right. Still, when the American hero Tim reflects that 'the worse the things that happen to them—the French—the more admirably resolute their smiles'—true British noses might go slightly out of joint: surely the stiff upper lip is *our* speciality.

The novel revolves around two couples and begins with Tim, a handsome, charming, well-intentioned American journalist, preparing for his wedding to his French fiancée. Pretty, streetwise, well-connected Anne-Sophie looks like a Boucher and keeps a stall in the *marché aux puces*, specialising in horsey antiques:

prints, porcelain, period riding gear. She moves in circles where the hostesses tend to be American widows of European aristocrats.

The other couple are Serge and Clara Cray. Serge is an American film director of East European origin: the French worship him as an *auteur*; although his last film was made many years back and he has become a semi-recluse (Polanski? Kubrick?—something like that). Soft-hearted, naive and dutiful, Clara is much younger than her husband and breathtakingly beautiful. Twelve years back, he directed her in her only film: then he married her, and she became the *châtelaine* of his grand estate, adjoining the Persands'. Like Tim, Clara is a very good person; Anne-Sophie is only a good person; Serge is not good at all, but not a villain.

The plot is hard to follow. Johnson writes at a great lick, and the *mariage of comédie de mœurs* and thriller is not always trouble-free. It begins with a murder in the *marché aux puces*, possibly connected with the theft of a manuscript from the Morgan Library in New York. The crime is witnessed by Anne-Sophie and by Delia, a young visitor from Oregon, who deals in bygones. Delia is slightly crippled, and on her first visit to Europe. The French police confiscate her passport, and the FBI are on her trail. She needs protection, so Clara (also from Oregon) takes her in, and perhaps Delia has an affair with Serge. Clara definitely has one with Antoine de Persand—real love, Romeo and Juliet stuff: the two families are enemies, because the Crays object to the local hunt (including, of course, the Persands) using their land. The Crays believe in animal rights. If they were to give permission, Clara would not have to go to jail (which she does, briefly) for removing the old *boiseries* from the Cray château. It happened before Cray bought it in Clara's name, but that does not alter her responsibility. As in *Le Divorce*, Johnson takes the trouble to explain the differences between French and American law: there it was divorce law, here it's property.

Johnson lives in San Francisco, and the contrast she draws is between rule-ridden France and West Coast America in whose laid-back, high-minded, cult-ridden, marginally loopy culture Clara and Delia grew up. But, as Tim explains, 'there are so many Americas'. He's from Michigan, with a Belgian mother, and he acts as a sympathetic, sensitive, intelligent interpreter of Franco-American differences—Johnson's alter ego, maybe. For that is her role too, and she plays it with engaging wit.

Her earlier novels were set on the West Coast. In the best of them, *Lying Low*, an idealistic young hippy is involved in an accidental killing during an attack on a

napalm factory. Her own life is in ruins, though Johnson allows it a happy ending. *Lying Low* is moving as well as extremely funny. *Le Mariage* is funny all right, but only occasionally touching: Johnson-lite. Read it on Eurostar.

Diane Johnson and Carolyn A. Durham (interview date 17 June 2003)

SOURCE: Johnson, Diane, and Carolyn A. Durham. "An Interview with Diane Johnson." *Contemporary Literature* 4, no. 2 (summer 2004): 189-217.

[In the following interview, conducted on June 17, 2003, Johnson discusses her career to date and the life experiences that have shaped her writing.]

My interview with Diane Johnson took place on June 17, 2003, in the apartment in the sixth arrondissement of Paris where Johnson and her husband spend six to eight months each year. From Johnson's living-room windows you can see the building where Edouard Manet was born. The hotel in which Luis Buñuel lived and Oscar Wilde died is just around the corner from the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts, located near the apartment. The entire neighborhood is crowded with art galleries, bookstores, and antique shops. A few blocks to the east lie the famous cafés of the boulevard St.-Germain-des-Près—the Deux Magots and the Flore, Johnson's favorite—both longtime havens for American as well as French and other European writers. Johnson often works in the library of the Institut de France, home to the forty literary *immortels* who make up France's celebrated Académie Française, which lies just west of her apartment, facing the Seine. Johnson, like many of the characters of her three most recent novels—*Le Divorce* (1997), *Le Mariage* (2000), and *L'Affaire* (2003)—lives in the cosmopolitan, artistic center of contemporary Paris. By chance, on the evening before the interview, she had attended a private screening of the film version of *Le Divorce*, also set on Paris's Left Bank. More importantly, two days earlier, she had hosted the closing reception for the international group of writers invited to participate in the first-ever literary festival organized by Shakespeare and Company. George Whitman's modern remake of the English-language bookstore founded in 1921 by Sylvia Beach continues to serve as an international crossroads and a home base for what is now the third successive generation of American and British expatriate writers, who include Diane Johnson among their most prominent members.

Born in 1939 in Moline, Illinois, Johnson's adult life has been marked by the same international travel and foreign settings that inform her fiction, in which a