Theory into Practice

An Introduction to Literary Criticism

Ann B. Dobie

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To the Student: An Introduction to *Theory into Practice*

If you are a person who reads on your own for pleasure or for information, you probably are in the habit of talking with other readers about what you find interesting. You share the questions a book raised for you, compare it with other works by the same writer, and reminisce about what it made you recall from your own experience. The discussion is probably informal, spontaneous, and momentary. You may not even remember it a couple of days later.

Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism invites you to join a similar conversation, the main difference being that it will be more thoughtful, prepared, and memorable than the casual one just described. If those seem like intimidating terms, a look at the table of contents will reassure you that it begins with critical approaches that are not far removed from the friendly conversation mentioned earlier. They will ask you to engage in forms of literary talk that you are probably already comfortable with. As your critical skills improve, you will be introduced to newer, and probably less familiar, schools of criticism.

The new approaches have appeared as part of a dramatic shift that has taken place in literary criticism over the past several decades. In a college literature class not too long ago you would probably have been expected to read from a biographical, historical, or formalist approach, the critical perspectives covered in the opening chapters of *Theory into Practice,* but the situation is dramatically different today. The forms of criticism available to (and expected of) a good reader have grown more complex and sometimes a bit troubling. They have certainly grown more numerous. Some fundamental assumptions and practices regarding the reader's role have changed with them, making your job as student and critic less easily defined and prescribed than it once was. Consider how the following changes have redefined your responsibilities.

The literary canon, once accepted as a cultural heritage to be passed down from one generation to another, is no longer a stable body of texts that all readers agree upon. Instead, it is now a conflicted, disputed set of materials that stay in flux. The "master works" have been challenged by others drawn from popular culture, and serious attention is paid to materials that once were not deemed worthy of study in higher education. Your task, now that the "masterpieces" are no longer accepted as

such, is to decide what a masterful text is after all and to which ones you would award that label.

Teachers, too, have changed, at least some of them. Once regarded as dispensers of knowledge and wisdom through the medium of the class lecture, they relieved the student of having to do much more than take down what was said, remember it, and demonstrate on occasion an understanding of it. The premise was that the teacher had the answer, and the student would learn it. Many effective classrooms operated under that system, for decades producing well-educated people who were good critical readers. Some still do, but today most teachers acknowledge that with the multiplicity of readings provided by the numerous new critical approaches, no single interpretation will suffice. Competing systems of inquiry create differing and sometimes conflicting understandings of any given work, and those disagreements, as Gerald Graff argues in *Beyond the Culture Wars,* can provide healthy debate that makes us better readers and critics. In short, in many of today's classrooms you are not expected to be the passive receptor of information or experience. Instead, you are required to assume the role of coparticipant in the making of a text. As a good reader, you cannot remain a silent partner in the conversation about a text, because what you have to say about it helps create it.

Another influence on current literary criticism is the sheer volume of information that is readily available on any subject. The amount of data that can be found on the Internet alone is almost overwhelming. Its effects on literary study are apparent in critics' frequent use of material that is drawn from nonliterary sources. In many of the newer approaches it is not enough to identify metaphors or rhyme schemes in a poem. Now you may be expected to use ideas from anthropology, sociology, or economics to explain what it means. The cross-disciplinary demands of today's critical approaches ask you to use everything you know—and more.

Perhaps the most demanding aspect of the reader's new role, but also probably the most important, is that you are put in the position of questioning basic assumptions about everything, not just literature. You may find that task to be a disquieting one, given that reading to affirm what we already know and accept is certainly a more comfortable position to be in. However, much of the vitality of the new approaches comes from the fact that they closely connect literature with our lives. They do so by making us look hard at what we often take for granted to see if it is valid, justifiable, and true. They make us examine values and practices that are so much a part of our lives that they exist, most of the time, beyond our questioning and evaluation.

Such practices are not universally accepted or approved. Some powerful voices have been raised in opposition. Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind,* for example, argues strongly against changes in the traditional curriculum, objecting to the inclusion of studies of popular culture and its products, which he sees as a less rigorous and significant body of subject matter than that which has been the staple of college curricula for several decades. Other detractors have objected to the political edge that many of the current critical perspectives have developed. Those who make such protests deny the validity of treating poetry or fiction as political documents that reveal the shortcomings of a society, promote the agendas of reformists, or serve to publicize an ignored minority. Whatever happened to literature as art, aesthetics,

timeless beauty? they ask. Doesn't looking at a text from a political point of view demean its existence? Doesn't literature transcend the transience of political concerns?

Two counterarguments are commonly used to justify the political aspect of today's literary criticism. Those critics who espouse the first agree with George Orwell's assertion: "No book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude." Simply put, there is no escaping politics. It is present in every assumption made about the social order, even when nothing explicitly labeled as political is being addressed.

The second justification points out that our culture is not a homogeneous one and that numerous minorities are no longer willing to pretend that it is. Previously silent voices are now calling for new definitions of cultural identity, celebrating their uniqueness and refusing to deny their own backgrounds and blend in with the rest. Their efforts are as influential in literature as in life; in both arenas they have ramifications that are political in nature. In the case of literature, their stand has led to new readings of both contemporary and traditional works and to recognition of previously overlooked writers.

Clearly the conversation about literature to which this book invites you is not a simple one. It is fraught with conflicts and disagreement. It questions traditional assumptions and practices. It requires you to evaluate what is and to reflect on what you think should be. You will not agree with everything that is said in the discussions; you will not agree on all points with fellow students or even your instructor. The resulting dissonance is expected and justifiable because intellectual engagement, not consensus, is the purpose. Your responsibility is to try out the techniques presented here so that you can make your own informed judgments about literature, literary criticism, and the world beyond them.

To play a competent part in any conversation requires being able to use the language in which it occurs with skill and effectiveness. To talk about literature means knowing the language of criticism. *Theory into Practice* is designed to help you understand that language, or languages, for each critical perspective has its own manner of speaking and writing. This text is, then, more than simply an invitation. It is a guide that will help you move from familiar conversations to others that may challenge your traditional ways of thinking. For each approach it will give you historical background, explanations of basic principles, extensive examples, suggestions for writing your analysis, a model student essay, a glossary of terms, recommended Web sites, and lists for further reading. At the end, in "Information at a Glance," you will find brief statements about purposes, assumptions, strategies, strengths, and weaknesses of each approach.

As you make your way through the schools of criticism discussed here, you will be dealing with complex ways of reading, analyzing, and interpreting literature that ask you to think long and deeply. If you approach them with a willingness to master their basic principles, to apply their strategies, and to make informed choices about their validity and effectiveness, they will help you discover the inexhaustible richness of reading critically. You are urged to make use of all the help that *Theory into Practice* offers as you join the critical conversation.

Works Analyzed in the Text

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I

THE RELATIONSHIP OF READING AND WRITING

Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.
JOSEPH ADDISON, English essayist

How can I know what I think till I see what I say?
E. M. FORSTER, English novelist and essayist

READING AND WRITING IN COLLEGE

Reading and writing seem to be inseparable acts, rather like two sides of the same coin. Sometimes we even say the three words as if they were only one: reading-and-writing. Their connections are echoed in the advice every successful writer gives fledgling ones to "read, read, read." So, too, we know that good readers grow more perceptive and insightful if they "write, write, write."

It all sounds so easy and natural. When we encounter a book that touches our emotions or disturbs our assumptions, for example, we want to share our reactions with someone else. We may call a friend to talk about it, or if there is nobody to listen, we may turn to writing to explain what we are thinking and feeling about what we have read. It is then we all too often discover that putting what we think about a novel or a poem down on paper in a form that someone else will find interesting (and intelligible) is not so simple. In school, where reading and writing are assigned, the problem can be more serious. Students sometimes struggle not only with expressing their opinions but also with finding them. Reading works that someone else has chosen for them, students may have trouble identifying something to write about. In the worst-case scenario, they may not even understand what they've read very well.

Academic survival depends on developing skills that will allow you to explore the meaning, aesthetics, or craft of a text and then write about the insights you've discovered. They are the skills of a literary critic, a person who examines how a piece of writing works, what it has to say about the culture or author that produced it or

about human nature in general, why it was written, in what ways it is similar to other works, and how it ranks in comparison with them. In short, to be a successful critic you need to be a resourceful reader, one who can utilize the principles of more than a single school of literary analysis and write with insight and understanding, as well as clarity and grace.

The writing you are asked to do in literature classes can take many forms, from marginal notes to quick journal entries and freewriting sessions, perhaps eventually going through many drafts to become a full-blown piece of academic discourse. But, of course, it may also take final form as a letter to a friend, a poem for your eyes only, or the answer to an essay question on an examination. The purpose and audience for your writing will determine how your critical pieces take shape and what that shape is. What does not change is that the reading-writing connection can be a valuable one for you, because by writing responses to what you read, you are likely to understand it better, remember it longer, relate it to other experiences more often (both those you have and those you read about), and use it more effectively.

We read and respond, then talk and write. The text we ultimately publish, whether as rough notes, a reading log, a creative effort, examination questions, or a research report, is literary criticism, an effort to share our experiences with someone else.

ENGAGING THE TEXT

Regardless of the assignment you are given, practicing literary criticism requires more than a single effort or skill. Even answering a question in class requires that you think about your response before speaking. Written criticism takes even more care. Whether you are dealing with a long research paper or an essay question on an exam that has a time limit, the job calls on you to carry out several complex tasks, and the process can be overwhelming if you try to think about them all at once. As a result, getting started is the hard part for many people. Where to begin isn't always obvious. To gain some control over the process, you can use some fairly simple techniques to help make your initial approach. They take little time but can pay big dividends later.

The techniques suggested as starting points here involve connecting reading and writing so that you can discover what you have to say. They include making marginal notations, keeping a reading log, and using prewriting strategies. It is likely that some of them will work better for you than others. For example, some readers find that making entries in a log disrupts their enjoyment of a text, but others make it a regular part of their reading process. You will have to be the judge of which strategies are most effective for you and which you find to be unproductive. The important step is to incorporate those that help into your own reading-writing process. Here are some that you may want to make a routine part of your approach to engaging a text.

ADDING MARGINAL NOTATIONS

One of the reasons that reading and writing seem to be two parts of a whole is that they sometimes take place at the same time. During the first reading of a work,