PART 2

Standing Back: Thinking Critically about Literature

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What Is Literature?

Learning Objectives

When you've read this chapter, you should be able to

- come to your own conclusions about what defines *literature*;
- expand your definitions of *literature* to include other cultural discourses;
- understand the relationships among content, form, and meaning in literary texts; and
- understand the current debate about the literary canon—and decide for yourself what you might include in a Canadian canon.

Perhaps the first thing to say is that it is impossible to define *literature* in a way that will satisfy everyone. And perhaps the second thing to say is that in the last twenty years or so, some serious thinkers have argued that it is impossible to set off certain verbal or written works from all others, and to designate them as *literature* on some basis or other. For one thing, it is argued, a work is just marks on paper or sounds in the air. The audience (reader or listener) turns these marks or sounds into something with meaning, and different audiences will construct different meanings out of what they read or hear. There are *texts* (birthday cards, sermons, political speeches, magazines, novels that sell by the millions and novels that don't sell at all, poems, popular songs, editorials, and so forth), but nothing that should be given the special title of *literature*. John M. Ellis argues, in *The Theory of Literary Criticism* (1974), that the word *literature* is something like the word *weed*. A weed is just a plant that gardeners for one reason or another don't want in the garden, but no plant has characteristics that clearly make it a weed and not merely a plant.

An important school of criticism known as CULTURAL MATERIALISM argues that what is commonly called literature and is regarded with some awe as embodying eternal truths is in fact only a "cultural construct," part of a huge project to make society and each person in it fit patterns that evolve through history. (The French thinker Michel Foucault has urged a whole new way of reading history that places events and even ways of understanding ourselves within constructions that evolve from the application of power.) According to cultural materialism, the writers of literature are the products of their age, and they are producing a product for a market, and the critic

therefore ought to be concerned chiefly not with whether the text is beautiful or true—these ideas themselves are only social constructions—but, rather, with how writers are shaped by their times. Critics might consider, for instance, how the physical conditions of the Elizabethan playhouse and how the attitudes of the Elizabethan playgoer influenced Shakespeare, and how writings work upon the readers and thus help to shape the times. We will discuss this notion of context in Chapter 8 and in Chapter 16.

Although there is something to be said for the idea that *literature* is just an honorific word and not a body of work embodying eternal truths and eternal beauty, let's make the opposite assumption, at least for a start. Let's assume that certain verbal works are of a distinct sort—whether because the author shapes them, or because a reader perceives them a certain way—and that we can call these works *literature.* But what are these works like?

LITERATURE AND FORM

We know why we value a newspaper or a textbook or an atlas, but why do we value a work that doesn't give us the latest news or information about business cycles or the names of the capitals of nations? About a thousand years ago, a Japanese woman, Lady Murasaki, offered an answer in *The Tale of Genji*, a book often called the world's first novel. During a discussion about reading fiction, a character offers an opinion as to why a writer tells a story. (This is an early example of **METAFICTION**.)

> Again and again something in one's own life, or in the life around one, will seem so important that one cannot bear to let it pass into oblivion. There must never come a time, the writer feels, when people do not know about this.

Literature is about human experiences, but the experiences embodied in literature are not simply the shapeless experiences—the chaotic passing scene—captured by a mindless, unselective camcorder. Poets, dramatists, and storytellers find or impose a shape on scenes (for instance, the history of two lovers), giving readers things to value—written or spoken accounts that are memorable not only for their content but also for their *form*—the shape of the speeches, of the scenes, of the plots. (In a little while, we will see that form and content are inseparable, but for the moment, for textbook purposes, we can talk about them separately.)

Ezra Pound said that literature is "news that *stays* news." Now, "John loves Mary," written on a wall, or on the front page of a newspaper, is news, but it is not news that stays news. It may be of momentary interest to the friends of John and Mary, but it's not much more than simple information and there is no particular reason to value it. Literature is something else. The Johns and Marys in poems, plays, and stories—even though they usually are fairly ordinary individuals, and in many ways they often are rather like us—somehow become significant as we perceive them through the writer's eye and ear. The writer selects what is important (or what the writer has learned

to value as important), and makes us care about the characters. Their doings stay in our mind.

To say that their doings stay in our minds is *not* to deny that works of literature show signs of being the products of particular ages and environments. It is only to say that these works are not exclusively about those ages and environments; they speak to later readers. The love affairs that we read about in the newspaper are of no interest a day later, but the love of Romeo and Juliet, with its joys and sorrows, has interested people for over four hundred years. Those who know the play may feel, with Lady Murasaki's spokesman, that there must never come a time when these things are not known. It should be mentioned, too, that readers find, on rereading a work, that the works are still of great interest but often for new reasons. That is, when as adolescents we read *Romeo and Juliet* we may value it for certain reasons, and when in maturity we reread it we may see it differently and we may value it for new reasons. It is news that remains news.

As the example of *Romeo and Juliet* indicates, literature need not be rooted in historical fact. Although guides in Verona find it profitable to point out Juliet's house, the play is not based on historical characters. Literature is about life, but it may be fictional, dealing with invented characters. In fact, almost all of the characters in literature are imaginary—though they *seem* real. In the words of Picasso,

> Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth. [. . .] The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.

We can put it this way: Literature shows *what happens*, rather than what happened. It may indeed be accurate history, but the fact that it is factual is unimportant.

One reason that literary works endure (whether they show us what we are or what we long for or dread) is that their form makes their content memorable. In Picasso's terms, the artist knows how to shape lies (fictions, imagined happenings) into enduring forms. Because this discussion of literature is brief, we will illustrate the point by looking at one of the briefest literary forms, the **PROVERB**. (Our definition of literature is not limited to the grand forms of the novel, tragedy, and so on. It is wide enough, and democratic enough, to include brief, popular, spoken texts.) Consider this statement:

> A rolling stone gathers no moss.

Now let's compare it with a paraphrase (a restatement, a translation into other words), for instance "If a stone is always moving around, vegetation won't have a chance to grow on it." What makes the original version more powerful, more memorable? Surely much of the answer is that the original is more concrete and its form is shapelier. At the risk of being heavy-handed, we can analyze the shapeliness thus: *Stone* and *moss* (the two nouns in the sentence) each contain one syllable; *rolling* and *gathers* (the two words of motion) each contain two syllables, each with the **ACCENT** on the first of the two syllables. Notice, too, the nice contrast between stone (hard) and moss (soft).

The reader probably *feels* this shapeliness unconsciously, rather than perceives it consciously. That is, these connections become apparent when one starts to analyze, but the literary work can make its effect on a reader even before the reader analyzes. As T. S. Eliot said in his essay on Dante (1929), "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood." Indeed, our *first* reading of a work, when we are all eyes and ears (and the mind is highly receptive rather than sifting for evidence), is sometimes the most important reading. Experience proves that we can feel the effects of a work without yet understanding *how* the effects are achieved.

Probably most readers will agree that the words in the proverb are paired interestingly and meaningfully. And perhaps they will agree, too, that the sentence is not simply some information but is also a composition, a careful arrangement of words. What the sentence *is*, we might say, is no less significant than what the sentence *says*. The sentence as a whole forms a memorable picture, a small but complete world, hard and soft, inorganic and organic, inert and moving. The idea set forth is simple—partly because it is highly focused and therefore it leaves out a lot—but it is also complex. By virtue of the contrasts, and, again, even by the pairing of monosyllabic nouns and of disyllabic words of motion, it is unified into a pleasing whole. For all of its specificity and its compactness—the proverb contains only six words—it expands our minds.

At this point, it must be said that many contemporary critics deny that unity is a meaningful concept. They argue that because each reader reads a text in his or her own way—in effect, each reader constructs or creates the text—it is absurd to talk about unity. Unity may be illusory. Or, on the other hand, if unity is real it is unwanted, a repressive cultural convention. We will discuss the point later, in Chapter 8, especially in conjunction with Deconstruction and Reader-Response theory, but here we will cite one example. In *Literary Theory* (1983), Terry Eagleton says, "There is absolutely no need to suppose that works of literature either do or should constitute harmonious wholes, and many suggestive frictions and collisions of meaning must be blandly 'processed' by literary criticism to induce them to do so" (81). Like many contemporary critics, Eagleton assumes that our society is riven with contradictions and that the art it produces is therefore also contradictory, fissured, fractured. Since the works are produced by a particular society and are consumed by that society, they are, in effect, propaganda for the present Late Capitalist economy, whether the authors know it or not. According to this view, critics who look for artistic unity falsify the works.

Contradictions are not always evident; it is sometimes fair for a critic to point out "absences" or "silences" or "omissions." That is, the critic may argue that certain material is not actually in the text, but its absence shows that the author has sought to repress the contradiction. Thus, a poem, story, or play about heterosexual romantic love may be seen as embodying a contradiction because it does *not* include any reference, say, to gay or lesbian love, or to marriage as a patriarchal construction that oppresses women. This view denies that any work is unified.

On the other hand, it is entirely legitimate to think about the choices a writer makes, and to wonder why *this* is included in the work whereas *that* is

not. Shakespeare chose, in his *King Lear,* to alter his source (*King Leir*) essentially; he dropped the happy ending (in the source, *Leir* is restored to the throne, and his beloved daughter Cordelia does not die). An examination of this sort of choice—which ending is more suitable—is another equally valuable way to read literature.

A Brief Exercise: Take a minute to think about some other proverb, for instance "Look before you leap," "Finders keepers," "Haste makes waste," "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," or whatever. Paraphrase it, and then ask yourself why the original is more interesting, more memorable, than your paraphrase.

LITERATURE AND MEANING

We have seen that the form of the proverb pleases the mind and the tongue, but what about content or MEANING? We may enjoy the images and the sounds, but surely the words add up to something. (It should be noted that some sound poets are more interested in the sound of words than their meaning. They try to show that meaning breaks down when the auditor concentrates on sound.) Probably most people would agree that the content or the meaning of "A rolling stone gathers no moss" is something like this: "If you are always on the move—if, for instance, you don't stick to one thing but you keep switching schools, or jobs—you won't accomplish much." Now, if this statement approximates the meaning of the proverb, we can say two things: (1) the proverb contains a good deal of truth, and (2) it certainly is not always true. Indeed this proverb is more or less contradicted by another proverb, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Many proverbs, in fact, contradict other proverbs. "Too many cooks spoil the broth," yes, but "Many hands make light the work"; "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," yes, but "Out of sight, out of mind"; "He who hesitates is lost," yes, but "Look before you leap." The claim that literature offers insights, or illuminates experience, is not a claim that it offers irrefutable and unvarying truths, covering the whole of our experience. Of course literature does not give us *the truth* (a concept some critics deny); rather it wakes us up, makes us see, helps us feel intensely some aspect of our experience and perhaps evaluate it. The novelist Franz Kafka said something to this effect, very strongly, in a letter of 1904:

> If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? [. . .] What we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves. [. . .] A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.

Arguing about Meaning

In Chapter 6, we will discuss at length the question of whether one interpretation—one statement of the meaning of a work—is better than another, but a word should be said about it now. Suppose that while discussing "A rolling stone gathers no moss" someone said to you,

> I don't think it means that if you are always on the move you won't accomplish anything. I think the meaning is something like the saying, "There are no flies on him." First of all, what's so great about moss developing? Why do you say that the moss more or less represents worthwhile accomplishments? And why do you say that the implication is that someone should settle down? The way I see it is just the opposite: The proverb says that active people don't let stuff accumulate on them, don't get covered over. That is, active people, people who accomplish things (people who get somewhere) are always unencumbered, are people who don't stagnate.

What reply can be offered? Probably no reply will sway the person who interprets the proverb this way. Perhaps, then, we must conclude (as the critic Northrop Frye said) that reading is a picnic to which the writer brings the words and the reader brings the meanings. The remark is witty and is probably true. Certainly readers over the years have brought very different meanings to such works as the Bible and *Hamlet.* Even if readers can never absolutely prove the truth of their interpretations, all readers have the obligation to make as convincing a case as possible. When you write about literature, you probably will begin (in your marginal jottings and in other notes) by setting down random expressions of feeling and even unsupported opinions, but later, when you are preparing to share your material with a reader, you will have to go further. You will have to try to show your reader *why* you hold the opinion you do. In short,

- you have to offer plausible supporting evidence, and
- you have to do so in a coherent and rhetorically effective essay.

That is, you'll have to make the reader in effect say, "Yes, I see exactly what you mean, and what you say makes a good deal of sense." You may not thoroughly convince your readers, but they will at least understand *why* you hold the views you do.

FORM AND MEANING

Let's turn now to a work not much longer than a proverb—a very short poem by Phyllis Webb. It is the twelfth in a group of poems titled "Non Linear":

> I have given up
> complaining
>
> but nobody
> notices

Read the poem aloud once or twice, physically experiencing Webb's wonderful use of language. Notice that it is possible to read the poem as a kind of prose sentence, but that the line breaks ask you to pause at key places. Notice that the poem could be read as a humorous comment that friends don't notice that the speaker has finally stopped complaining. But it seems—because, perhaps, of the line breaks—that a more sober reading is intended. The speaker has given up complaining, but those who do not notice her (or him)

don't notice even that fact. These comments assume you read the first two lines together: "I have given up complaining." But if you read them as totally separate comments—"I have given up." "[I am] complaining"—then the speaker is giving up because "nobody notices." No two readers will read the lines in exactly the same way, and that gives the poem its elusive strength. Let's consider how the lines may break:

1. I have given up complaining. No one notices that I've done so.
2. I have given up because nobody notices my complaints.
3. I have given up. I am complaining. But I have nobody. But nobody notices.
4. I have given up totally because when I gave up complaining nobody noticed.
5. I am complaining that nobody notices that I've given up.
6. I have given up complaining and, in fact, I've just plain given up, but as there is nobody out there, no one notices.

Each of these readings is possible, though some are more likely than others. The point is that this poem allows a READER-RESPONSE that is partly controlled by how the reader puts meaning to the line lengths.

The reader can also read the poem aloud, or with the mind's ear, in a number of ways. How would you **STRESS** this poem that doesn't use a conventional **METRE**? Again, there are various possibilities:

I have given up
COMPLAINING

but nobody
NOTICES

and

I have GIVEN UP
complaining

but NObody
notices

and so on. These two examples might prompt the humorous or sombre interpretations mentioned at the outset. Other emphases allow for more nuanced interpretations:

I have GIven UP
complaining

BUT NObody
NOTICES.

Consider how you first read the poem. Have you changed your reading? How does your way of stressing words alter your sense of what the poet is saying? Do you see that the more subtly you stress syllables or leave weak notes, the more possible ways you have to understand multiple meanings in the

poem? Older poems with conventional rhythms sometimes forced a reader to a certain way of responding. (Think of Tennyson, for example, who urges patriotism in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" even though the subject matter calls for a renunciation of nationalism: "Half a league, Half a league, Half a league onward / All in the valley of death / Rode the six hundred.") Most contemporary poems do not prescribe a reading, but invite individual responses. **DECONSTRUCTION**, which we discuss in Chapter 8, urges readers to observe the "free play" between meanings.

Notice also that there is WHITE SPACE between the first two lines and the last two. This blank space is also part of the poem. How will you "speak" it? Is it a pause? Or does it cause you to emphasize the second **COUPLET**? It seems to ask for a pause, and it also highlights the two couplets—both linking them and pushing them apart. That might ask for the readings, "I have given up complaining" and "But nobody notices." Or it might act to link "complaining" and "But nobody," the lines that border the white space. Or it might highlight "complaining" and "But nobody" by putting no other words near these statements. It certainly allows you to read each couplet as complete in itself and then as part of the larger poem. So we have three tiny poems here that are really all part of one. The space is an active part of the form of this poem, even though it seems just to be "nothing."

The single words and short comments of these lines make the reader slow down, pronounce each piece, and think about it. That may bring about a sense of despair that no one notices what we do or say. Or, again, it may cause us to link the fragments together: "But there is nobody. Nobody notices. = There is nobody to notice." This way, the same word operates in two different groupings. Does the isolation of each word or word group invite these double linkages?

Part of what makes the poem effective is that the theme is *not* stated explicitly, not belaboured. Readers have the pleasure of making the connection for themselves—under Webb's careful guidance. Or let's put it this way: Other people may have noticed that they are alone, or that friends have stopped listening to their problems, but perhaps only Webb thought (to use Lady Murasaki's words), "There must never come a time [. . .] when people do not know about this." And, fortunately for all of us, Webb had the ability to put this perception into memorable words. Skill in handling language, obviously, is indispensable if the writer is to produce literature. A person may be feeling emotions like these, but emotion is not enough equipment with which to write even a four line poem. Poems, like other kinds of literature, are produced by people who know how to delight us with what the American poet Robert Frost called, "a performance in words." Once you have read or heard the poem, you can never again hear a complaint, or notice a friend is remaining silent, in quite the way you used to—and probably the poem will keep coming to mind as you notice your own solitude. Fairness requires us to mention, however, that many thoughtful people disagree, and argue that literature and art entertain us but do not really influence us in any significant way. In trying to resolve this debate, perhaps you can rely only on your own experience.

We can easily see that Phyllis Webb's poem is a work of literature—a work that uses language in a special way—if we contrast it with another short work in rhyme:

Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November;
All the rest have thirty-one
Excepting February alone,
Which has twenty-eight in fine,
Till leap year gives it twenty-nine.

This information is important, but it is only information. The lines rhyme, giving the work some form, but there is nothing very interesting about it. (This is a matter of opinion; perhaps you will want to take issue.) It is not news that stays news, probably because it only *tells* us facts rather than *shows* or *presents* human experience. We all remember the lines, but they do not hold our interest. "Thirty Days" does not offer either the pleasure of an insight or the pleasure of an interesting tune. It has nothing of what the poet Thomas Gray said characterizes literature: "Thoughts that breathe, and words that burn."

As we will see, there are many ways of writing about literature, but one of the most interesting is to write not simply about the author's "thoughts" (or ideas) as abstractions but about the particular *ways* in which an author makes thoughts memorable, chiefly through the manipulation of words that at least glow if they don't "burn."

The poet W. H. Auden once defined literature as "a game of knowledge." Games have rules, forms; and conformity to the rules is part of the fun of playing a game. We don't want the hockey player to pick up the puck and skate away with it, or the tennis player to tear down the net. The fun in writing literature comes largely from performing effectively within the rules, or from introducing new rules and then working within them. For Auden, a work of art is "a verbal contraption," and in every work of art (as in a game), "Freedom and Law, System and Order are united in harmony" (*The Dyer's Hand* [1968], 50, 71).

We don't play (or watch) games because they teach us to be good citizens, or even because they will make us healthier; we play and watch them because they give us pleasure. But Auden's definition of literature is not simply "a game"; it is "a game of knowledge." When Auden speaks of knowledge, he is speaking of the writer's understanding of human experience. We are back to Lady Murasaki's comment that "there must never come a time, the writer feels, when people do not know" about certain experiences. This knowledge that Lady Murasaki and Auden speak of is conveyed through words, arranged as in a performance or a game. The performance may be very brief, as in the highly structured proverb about a rolling stone, or it may be extended into a novel of a thousand pages. Many of the later pages in this book will be devoted to talking about structure in fiction, drama, and poetry.

THE LITERARY CANON

You may have heard people talk about the **CANON** of literature; that is, talk about the recognized body of literature. *Canon* comes from a Greek word for a *reed* (it's the same as our word *cane*); a reed or cane was used as a yardstick, and certain works were said to measure up to the idea of literature. Many plays by Shakespeare fit the measure and were accepted into the canon early (and they have stayed there), but many plays by his contemporaries never entered the canon—in their own day they were performed, maybe applauded, and some were published, but later generations have not valued them. In fact, some plays by Shakespeare, too, are almost never taught or performed, for instance *Cymbeline* and *Timon of Athens*. And, conversely, some writers are known chiefly for a single work, although they wrote a great deal. The canon, in actuality, has always been highly varied. Because, until fairly recently, in the Euro–North American world white males were the people doing most of the publishing, white males controlled the publishing industry and white males were deemed to have value that other people were deemed not to have, the canon chiefly contained the work of white males. Much was written by women and people of colour, but very little of it was published, and the few examples that entered the canon did so because they fit the established assumptions of the canonical world. Even in the traditional male-dominated canon, however, the range was great, including, for instance, ancient epic poems by Homer (who is now thought not to have been a single person), tragedies and comedies by Shakespeare, brief lyrics by Wordsworth, and short stories and novels by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In Canada, a canon has been forming through the twentieth century. As it happens, the process of its creation is coinciding with the move to disband canons, making the development of a Canadian canon a conflicted one. There are writers who are clearly part of a Canadian canon: Robertson Davies, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Jack Hodgins, Michael Ondaatje, Dorothy Livesay, Phyllis Webb, Michel Tremblay, George Walker, Judith Thompson, Tomson Highway—the list is much, much longer. And some of these writers have joined larger, international canons. But the process of becoming known has been different for these writers than for earlier European and American writers who entered already established canons.

Further, the canon—the group of works esteemed by a community of readers—keeps changing, partly because in different periods somewhat different measuring rods are used. For instance, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*—a play about war, in which heroism and worthy ideals are in short supply—for several hundred years was performed only rarely, but during the Vietnam War it became popular in the United States, doubtless because the play was seen as an image of that widely unpopular war. More important, however, than the shifting fortunes of individual works is the recent inclusion of material representing newly valued kinds of experiences. In our day, we have become increasingly aware of the voices of women and of members of minority cultures, for instance First Nations Peoples, Canadians of colour, lesbians, and gay men. As a consequence, works by these people—giving voice to

identities previously ignored by the larger society—are now taught in literature classes.

What is or is not literature, then, changes over the years; in the language of today's criticism, "literature" as a category of "verbal production and reception" is itself a "historical construction" rather than an unchanging reality. Insofar as a new generation finds certain verbal works pleasing, moving, powerful, memorable, compelling, they become literature. Today, a course in Canadian literature may include works by Hiromi Goto, Roo Borson, or Wayde Compton, but it probably will also include works by long-established favourites such as Munro, Purdy, and Findley.

Some works have measured up for so long that they probably will always be valued; that is, they will always be part of a literary canon, though it is unlikely that there will be only one recognized canon. (Indeed, many young critics are suspicious even of the notion of canon.) But of course one cannot predict the staying power of new works. Doubtless some stories, novels, poems, and plays, as well as some television scripts and popular songs, will endure. Most of the literature of *any* generation, however, measures up only briefly; later generations find it dated, uninteresting, unexciting.

LITERATURE, TEXTS, DISCOURSES, AND CULTURAL STUDIES

These pages have routinely spoken of *literature* and of literary *works*, terms recently often supplanted by *text*. Some say that *literature* is a word with elitist connotations. They may say, too, that a *work* is a crafted, finished thing, whereas a TEXT, in modern usage, is something that in large measure is created (i.e., given meaning) by a reader. Further, the word *text* helps to erase the line between what traditionally has been called literature—for instance, canonized material—and popular verbal forms such as science fiction, Westerns, political addresses, interviews, advertisements, comic strips, and bumper stickers—and, for that matter, nonverbal products such as sports events, architecture, fashion design, automobiles, and the signs in a shopping mall. Texts or DISCOURSES of this sort (said to be parts of what is called a DISCURSIVE PRACTICE or a **SIGNIFYING PRACTICE**) in recent years have increasingly interested many people. They are the texts of cultural studies. In this approach, the emphasis is not on artefacts inherently valuable and taught apart from the conditions of their production. Rather, the documents—whether plays by Shakespeare or comic books—are studied in their social and political contexts, especially in view of the conditions of their production, distribution, and consumption. Thus, *Hamlet* would be related to the economic and political system of England around 1600, and *also* to the context today—the educational system, the theatre industry, and so on—that produces the work. (We discuss New Historicism in Chapter 8.) Some claim that studying a work otherwise—studying a literary work as an aesthetic object, something to be enjoyed and admired apart from its context, "sacralizes" it: treats it as a sacred thing, and in effect mummifies it.

IN BRIEF: A CONTEMPORARY AUTHOR SPEAKS ABOUT LITERATURE

Finally, in an effort to establish an idea of what literature is, let's listen to the words of Margaret Laurence, an author of stories and novels. Laurence, as a highly successful writer, could of course be examined in the context of cultural studies: How are her novels promoted? What sorts of people (race, class, gender) read Laurence? To what extent did her success jibe with the currency of the subjects she treated? But Laurence's own abundant comments about writing are almost entirely concerned with aesthetic matters, as in the following passage. She is talking about her story "The Loons," but we can apply her words to all sorts of literature:

> History for me, as with social issues, is personalized—these events happen to real people; people with names, families and places of belonging. [. . .] And so, by some mysterious process which I don't claim to understand, the story gradually grew in my mind until it found its own shape and form.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Subsequent chapters will cite a fair number of recent titles relevant to this chapter, but for a start a reader might first turn to an old but readable, humane, and still useful introduction, David Daiches, *A Study of Literature* (1948). Another book of the same generation, and still a useful introduction, is a businesslike survey of theories of literature, by René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 2nd ed. (1956). For a fairly recent, readable study, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987).

Some basic reference works should be mentioned. An introductory dictionary of movements, critical terms, literary periods, and genres is C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 6th ed. (1992). For fuller discussions of critical terms, see John Peck and Martin Coyle, *Literary Terms and Criticism* (1993), and Wendell V. Harris, *Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory* (1992), each of which devotes several pages to each concept and gives useful reading lists for each entry. See also: Irene Makaryk, ed., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms* (1993), and Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (1994), and Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (1994). More topics are discussed in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (1993), which offers lucid entries (with suggestions for further reading) on such terms as "allegory," "criticism," "canon," and "irony." For a collection of essays on the canon, see *Canons*, ed. Robert von Hallberg (1984); see also an essay by Robert Scholes, "Canonicity and Textuality," in *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, ed. Joseph Gibaldi, 2nd ed. (1992), 138–58. Gibaldi's collection includes essays on related topics, for instance literary theory (by Jonathan Culler) and on cultural studies (by David Bathrick). For essays specific to the Canadian canon, see Robert Lecker, ed., *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value* (1991), a very valuable collection that urges reconsideration of the way Canadian literature has been read and valued in the past.

6

What Is Interpretation?

> **Learning Objectives**
>
> When you've read this chapter, you should be able to
>
> ➢ interpret a literary text persuasively;
>
> ➢ ensure that your interpretation is reasonable given the contexts of the work, the author, the period in which the text was written, and our own period;
>
> ➢ avoid the fallacy of thinking you know the author's intention;
>
> ➢ find evidence and counterevidence in the text for your thesis; and
>
> ➢ read other interpretations critically, evaluating what is reasonable and well evidenced and what is not.

INTERPRETATION AND MEANING

We can define **INTERPRETATION** as a setting forth of the meaning, or, better, a setting forth of one or more of the meanings of a work of literature. This question of *meaning* versus *meanings* deserves a brief explanation. Although some critics believe that a work of literature has a single meaning—the meaning it had for the author—most critics hold that a work has several meanings: for instance the meaning it had for the author, the meaning(s) it had for its first readers (or viewers, if the work is a drama or film), the meaning(s) it had for later readers, and the meaning(s) it has for us today. Take *Hamlet* (1600–01), for example. Perhaps this play about a man who has lost his father had a very special meaning for Shakespeare, who had recently lost his own father when he wrote the play. Further, Shakespeare had earlier lost a son named Hamnet, a variant spelling of Hamlet. The play, then, may have had important psychological meanings for Shakespeare—but the audience could not have shared (or even known) these meanings.

What did the play mean to Shakespeare's audience? Perhaps the original audience of *Hamlet*—people living in a monarchy, presided over by Queen Elizabeth I—were especially concerned with the issue (specifically raised in *Hamlet*) of whether a monarch's subjects ever have the right to overthrow the sovereign. But obviously for twentieth-century Canadians the interest in the play lies elsewhere and the play must mean something else. If we are familiar with Freud, we may see in the play a young man who has a confused

sexual response to his mother and seeks to kill his father (in the form of Claudius, Hamlet's uncle). Or we may see the play as largely about an alienated young man in a bourgeois society. Or—but the interpretations are countless.

IS THE AUTHOR'S INTENTION A GUIDE TO MEANING?

Shouldn't we be concerned, one might ask, with the intentions of the author? The question is reasonable, but there are difficulties, as justices of the Supreme Court find when they must interpret the intent of the Charter of Rights. First, for older works, we almost never know what the intention was. Authors did not leave comments about their intentions. We have *Hamlet,* but we do not have any statement of Shakespeare's intention concerning this or any other play. One might argue that we can deduce Shakespeare's intention from the play itself, but to argue that we should study the play in the light of Shakespeare's intention, and that we can know his intention by studying the play, is to argue in a circle. We can say that Shakespeare must have intended to write a tragedy (if he intended to write a comedy, he failed) but we can't go much further in talking about his intention.

Even if an author has gone on record, expressing an intention, we may think twice before accepting the statement as decisive. The author may be speaking facetiously, deceptively, mistakenly, or (to be brief) unconvincingly. For instance, Thomas Mann said, probably sincerely and accurately, that he wrote one of his novels merely in order to entertain his family—but we may nevertheless take the book seriously and find it profound.

IS THE WORK THE AUTHOR'S OR THE READER'S?

A good deal of recent critical theory argues that writers—usually quite unconsciously and despite how independent they may think they are—largely reflect the ideas of their age. In current terminology, to accept the artist's statements about a work is "to privilege intentionalism." The idea that the person who seems to have created the work cannot comment definitively on it is especially associated with Roland Barthes (1915–80), author of a much-reprinted essay entitled "The Death of the Author," and Michel Foucault (1926–84), author of an equally famous essay entitled "What Is an Author?" (Barthes's essay may be found in his *Image-Music-Text,* and Foucault's in *Foucault Reader.*) Foucault, for example, assumes that the concept of the author is a repressive invention designed to impede the free circulation of ideas. In Foucault's view, the work belongs—or ought to belong—to the *perceiver,* not to the alleged maker.

Much can be said on behalf of this idea—and much can be said against it. On its behalf, one can again say that we can never entirely recapture the writer's intentions and sensations. Suppose, for instance, we are reading an early work by Earle Birney, the poet and educator who wrote as a Marxist

as a young man. None of us can exactly recover Birney's attitudes; we cannot exactly recreate in our minds what it was like to be Birney in the 1930s and 1940s—the period during which his early novel, *Down the Long Table,* was suppressed by the government. We can read his texts, but we necessarily read them through our own eyes and in our own times, whether during the popularity of Marxist criticism in the 1960s, or now, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc countries.

Similarly, we can read or see a performance of an ancient Greek tragedy (let's choose Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*), but surely we cannot experience the play as did the Greeks, for whom it was part of an annual ritual. Further, a Greek spectator probably had seen earlier dramatic versions of the story. The Oedipus legend was, so to speak, part of the air that the Greeks breathed. Moreover, we know (or think we know) things that the Greeks did not know. In the twenty-first century, familiar as we are with Freud's view of the Oedipus complex—the idea that males wish to displace their fathers by sleeping with their mothers—we probably cannot experience Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* without seeing it through Freud's eyes, as we earlier said was true of modern viewings of *Hamlet.*

However, *against* the idea that works have no inherent core of meaning that all careful readers can perceive, one can argue that a competent writer shapes the work so that his or her meaning is largely evident to a competent reader—that is, to a reader familiar with the language and with the conventions of literature. (Writers of course do not mindlessly follow conventions; they can abide by, challenge, or even violate conventions, putting them to fresh purposes. But to deeply enjoy and understand a given work—say, an **ELEGY**—one needs some familiarity with other works of a similar kind.) Many people who write about literature assume a community of informed readers, and indeed it seems to be supported by common sense.

WHAT CHARACTERIZES A GOOD INTERPRETATION?

Even the most vigorous advocates of the idea that meaning is indeterminate do not believe that all interpretations are equally significant. Rather, they believe that an interpretative essay is offered against a background of ideas, shared by essayist and reader, as to what constitutes a *persuasive argument.* Thus, an essay (even if it is characterized as "interpretative free play" or "creative engagement") will have to be coherent, plausible, and rhetorically effective. The presentation as well as the interpretation is significant. This means (to repeat a point made in Chapter 2) that the essayist cannot merely set down random expressions of feeling or unsupported opinions. The essayist must, on the contrary, convincingly *argue* a thesis—must point to evidence so that the reader will not only know what the essayist believes but will also understand why he or she believes it.

There are lots of ways of making sense (and even more ways of making nonsense), but one important way of helping readers to see things from your point of view is to do your best to face all of the complexities of the work.

Put it this way: Some interpretations strike a reader as better than others because they are *more inclusive,* that is, because they *account for more of the details of the work.* The less-satisfactory interpretations leave a reader pointing to some aspects of the work—to some parts of the whole—and saying, "Yes, but your explanation doesn't take account of [. . .]." This does not mean, of course, that a reader must feel that a persuasive interpretation says the last word about the work. We always realize that the work—if we value it highly—is richer than the discussion, but, again, for us to value an interpretation we must find the interpretation plausible and inclusive.

Interpretation often depends on making connections not only among various elements of the work (for instance among the characters in a story, or among the images in a poem), and among the work and other works by the author, but also on making connections between the particular work and a cultural context. The cultural context usually includes other writers and specific works of literature, since a given literary work participates in a tradition. That is, if a work looks toward life, it also looks toward other works. A **SONNET**, for example, may be about a human experience, but it is also part of a tradition of sonnet-writing. The more works of literature you are familiar with, the better equipped you are to interpret any particular work. Here is the way the American poet Robert Frost put it, in the preface to *Aforesaid*:

> A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written. We read A the better to read B (we have to start somewhere; we may get very little out of A). We read B the better to read C, C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something more out of A. Progress is not the aim, but circulation. The thing is to get among the poems where they hold each other apart in their places as the stars do.

Given the views (1) that a work of literature may have several or even many meanings, that (2) some meanings may be unknowable to a modern spectator, and that (3) meaning is largely or even entirely determined by the viewer's particular circumstances, some students of literature prefer to say that they offer a "commentary" on the "significance" of a work rather than an "interpretation" of the "meaning."

AN EXAMPLE: INTERPRETING PATRICK LANE'S "THE CHILDREN OF BOGOTA"

Let's think about interpreting a short poem by Patrick Lane, written in 1975.

THE CHILDREN OF BOGOTA

The first thing to understand, Manuel says,
is that they're not children. Don't start feeling
sorry for them. There are five thousand
roaming the streets of this city. 4

and just because they look innocent
doesn't make them human. Any one
would kill you for the price of a meal.
Children? See those two in the gutter 8

behind that stall? I saw them put out
the eyes of a dog with thorns because
it barked at them. Tomorrow it could be you.
No one knows where they come from 12
but you can be sure they're not going.
In five years they'll be men and tired of killing
dogs. And when that happens you'll be the first
to cheer when the carabineros shoot them down. 16

Perhaps most readers will agree that the poem dramatizes a conversation between, say, a taxi driver and visitors to Bogotá, Colombia. It is likely that most Canadian readers will interpret the visitors as tourists. The cabby or tour guide presents shocking information to the rather naïve tourists. It seems likely that the visitors expressed concern for street children and this reply disabuses the visitors of any romantic notions. (Lane is not saying that *all* taxi drivers have this opinion; he has simply invented one speaker who says such-and-such. Of course *we* may say that Lane says all residents of Bogotá have this opinion, but that is our interpretation.) The poem states that the visitors must "understand" the life of these children and their violent response to it against the lives we expect (or hope) for children. The poem highlights the word *children* and puts a question mark after it. The speaker almost laughs at the unheard use of the word by the visitors in relation to these violent youths. Lane breaks down any romantic notions by the image of a dog whose eyes have been put out. This is an ugly image, and an image that offends most Canadians, who are fond of animals. We are reminded that these youths have no pets, no families, no love: They live by their wits and bodies on the streets and they will lash out at anything that gets in their way. On the other hand, Lane also makes a strong link between the horrible blinding of a hapless dog and the equally unfair plight of these children who are not considered "human."

One can see other comments in the poem: It is also a warning. These children are a powder keg, ready to go off. There are "five thousand" of them, representing a serious threat to any society. And, of course, also to the developed countries that allow these injustices to continue. The speaker—who now seems frightened himself—warns that in "five years" these children will be men and might turn to killing what? Visitors? The speaker cynically adds that these tourists will, themselves, then cheer when the police shoot the dangerous thugs. It is a chilling comment on the difference between a fantasy of innocence and our instinctive response to protect ourselves.

A reader might seek Lane out, and ask him why he put the word "dogs" at the beginning of the penultimate line, rather than at the end of the line above, but Lane might not be willing to answer, or he might say that he

doesn't really know why, it just seemed right when he wrote the poem. Most authors do in fact take this last approach. When they are working as writers, they work by a kind of instinct, a kind of feel for the material. Later they can look critically at their writing, but that's a different experience.

To return to our basic question: What characterizes a good interpretation? The short answer is, evidence, and especially evidence that seems to cover all relevant issues. In an essay, it is not enough merely to assert an interpretation. Your readers don't expect you to make an airtight case, but because you are trying to help your reader to understand a work—to see a work the way you do—you are obliged

- to offer reasonable supporting evidence, and
- to take into account what might be set forth as counterevidence to your thesis.

Of course, your essay may originate in an intuition or an emotional response, a sense that the work is about such-and-such, but this intuition or emotion must then be examined, and it must stand a test of reasonableness. (It's usually a good idea to jot down in a journal your first responses to a work, and in later entries to reflect on them.) It is not enough in an essay merely to set forth your response. Your readers will expect you to *demonstrate* that the response is something that they can to a large degree share. They will want you to *develop* your ideas, not merely list them. They may not be convinced that the interpretation is right or true, but they must at least feel that the interpretation is plausible and in accord with the details of the work, rather than, say, highly eccentric and irreconcilable with some details.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT LITERATURE

Usually you will begin with a strong response to your reading—interest, boredom, bafflement, annoyance, shock, pleasure, or whatever. Fine. Then, if you are going to think critically about the work, you will go on to examine your response in order to understand it, or to deepen it, or to change it.

How can you change a response? CRITICAL THINKING involves seeing an issue from all sides, to as great a degree as possible. As you know, in ordinary language *to criticize* usually means to find fault, but in literary studies it does not have a negative connotation. Rather, it means *to examine carefully*. (The word *criticism* comes from a Greek verb meaning *to distinguish, to decide, to judge.*) Nevertheless, in one sense the term *critical thinking* does approach the usual meaning, since critical thinking requires that you take a sceptical view of your response. You will, so to speak, argue with yourself, seeing if your response can stand up to doubts.

Let's say that you have found a story implausible. Question yourself:

- Exactly what is implausible in it?
- Is implausibility always a fault?
- If so, exactly why?

Your answers may deepen your response. Usually, in fact, you will find supporting evidence for your response, but in your effort to distinguish and to decide and to judge, try also (if only as an exercise) to find COUNTEREVIDENCE. See what can be said against your position. (The best lawyers, it is said, prepare two cases—their own, and the other side's.) As you consider the counterevidence, you will sometimes find it necessary to adjust your thesis. Writing is a process, so changing your mind is perfectly acceptable. You may even find yourself developing an entirely different response. That's also fine, though of course the paper that you ultimately hand in should clearly argue one thesis.

Critical thinking, in short, means examining or exploring one's own responses, by questioning and testing them. Critical thinking is not so much a skill (though it does involve the ability to understand a text) as it is a habit of mind, or, rather, several habits, including

- open-mindedness
- intellectual curiosity, and
- willingness to work.

It may involve, for instance, the willingness to discuss the issues with others, and to do research, a topic that will be treated separately in Chapter 15, on writing a research paper.

THREE STUDENT INTERPRETATIONS OF EARLE BIRNEY'S "THE BEAR ON THE DELHI ROAD"

Read Birney's poem, "The Bear on the Delhi Road," and then read the first interpretation, written by a first-year student. This interpretation is followed by a discussion that is devoted chiefly to two questions:

- What is the essayist's thesis?
- Does the essayist offer convincing evidence to support the thesis?

Two additional essays by first-year students, offering different interpretations of the poem, provide further material for you to analyze critically.

THE BEAR ON THE DELHI ROAD
Earle Birney

Unreal   tall as a myth
by the road the Himalayan bear
is beating the brilliant air
with his crooked arms
About him two men   bare   5
spindly as locusts   leap

One pulls on a ring
in the great soft nose   His mate
flicks   flicks with a stick
up at the rolling eyes   10

They have not led him here
down from the fabulous hills
to this bald alien plain
and the clamorous world   to kill
but simply to teach him to dance   15

They are peaceful both   these spare
men of Kashmir   and the bear
alive is their living   too
If far on the Delhi way
around him galvanic they dance   20
it is merely to wear   wear
from his shaggy body the tranced
wish forever to stay
only an ambling bear
four-footed in berries   25

It is no more joyous for them
in this hot dust to prance
out of reach of the praying claws
sharpened to paw for ants
in the shadows of deodars   30
It is not easy to free
myth from reality
or rear this fellow up
to lurch   lurch with them
in the tranced dancing of men   35

A Student Essay and Commentary

Surinder Sihota

On the Road to the World of Men

Earle Birney's "The Bear on the Delhi Road" is about what the title says, and it is also about something more than the title says. When I say it is about what the title says, I mean that the poem really does give us a picture of two peasant men from Kashmir and a bear that they are leading down the road. We are told it is the road to Delhi, the capital of India, a huge city teeming with people. In line 13 the narrator says the men have come from "fabulous hills" down to "this alien plain." The plain is full of "hot dust." So it is clear that these men have left a beautiful mountainous region where it is probably cool to come down onto the great central plain of India where it is very hot. The heat makes

their rough condition worse. In line 19, we are told that they have already come "far on the Delhi way" so we know that the journey has been going on for some time and that they are, in fact, well into this part of the country that is "alien" to them.

But in what sense is the poem about more than the title? The title does not tell us anything about the men who are on "the Delhi Road," but the narrator's meditation on the scene tells us a lot about them. In the first stanza he reveals that the men are "bare" and "spindly as locusts." This means that they are very thin and semi-naked. They are poor and they don't seem to be part of the main society to which they are travelling. The second stanza gives the information that they are "mates" and the fourth that they are "peaceful men." Perhaps each is the only friend the other man has. They seem very alone, except for the bear. These men dance and "prance" around the bear. The image of the men is not typical of North American images of men who aren't usually seen dancing and wouldn't want to be described as "pranc[ing]." Men are always afraid of any suggestion that they aren't masculine. The rules by which men live say how they can move and what occupations are "manly." These two are quiet, want no trouble and just want to keep out of the way of anything that will hurt them: they keep "out of the reach of the praying claws."

The bear doesn't fit in, either. The bear is also lonely. He wants to remain in a trance, pretending that he is just hunting for berries in his old home. These men have forced the bear to come to the main society and to perform. It is important that this is a male bear. The narrator shows him as a big, "shaggy" creature, strong, but trapped and held in check by a ring through his nose. The nose is described as a "great, soft nose." Again, the strength of the bear is contrasted with his soft nose and his desire just to be "ambling / four-footed in berries." The bear is being made to conform to standards that aren't natural for him and is being made to earn a living for the men. He wants to be free to forage for berries but our society doesn't allow him to live his own life. He must work and he must submit to the power of the men who control him.

Birney may be saying that the two men who have power over the bear--another male creature--don't have any power themselves. They are forced to make a living, too, and they can't just be peaceful "mates." What they are having to do is not "joyous" for them. When the bear dances, he just "lurches," but so do they. And the bear is being made to give up one trance for another.

What does Birney mean by the "tranced dancing of men"? Does he mean that all people live in a myth and are drugged by common beliefs? Or does he really mean "men" are? I think the poem is speaking about men. These two men might want to be "peaceful" and live in the hills as mates. Perhaps they are even lovers. But our modern world says everyone must work, everyone must come to cities and all men must obey rules of conduct. The reality of their lives might be one thing, but they are forced to live in the myth of what men are. The poem may be talking about peasants on a road in India, but the lack of freedom for men to be themselves, to be with a friend, and to be different is true in our world, as well. Society has every man by a ring in his nose.

Let's examine this essay briefly.

The title is interesting. It gives the reader a good idea of which literary work will be discussed ("On the Road") and it arouses interest, in this case by suggesting a destination that isn't literal and extends the comment outside India. A title of this sort is preferable to a title that merely announces the topic, such as "An Analysis of Birney's 'The Bear on the Delhi Road'" or "On a Poem by Earle Birney." (Notice that the title is centred, has no period at the end, and is not enclosed in quotation marks or underlined.)

The opening paragraph helpfully names the exact topic (Earle Birney's poem) and arouses interest by asserting that the poem is about something more than its title. The writer's thesis presumably will be a fairly specific assertion concerning what else the poem is "about."

The body of the essay, beginning with the second paragraph, begins to develop the thesis. (The THESIS perhaps can be summarized thus: "The men, like the bear, are trapped males in a world that demands they live by certain rules.") The writer's evidence in the second and third paragraphs is that these men are poor, maybe because they don't live in the "mainstream society," that they are friends who are close enough to be called "mates," and that they are "peaceful men." Readers of Sihota's essay may at this point be unconvinced by this evidence, but probably they suspend judgment. In any case, he has offered what he considers to be evidence in support of his thesis.

The next paragraph turns to the bear and links him with the men. The bear, Sihota says, wants to remain in his own "trance" but is being made to

conform. He is strong, but is kept in place by a ring in a nose, which—in its own right—is soft. Do we agree with Sihota's assertion, in the last sentence of this paragraph, that Birney is suggesting that "men must work and submit to the power of other men"? Clearly this is the way Sihota takes the poem, but do you agree with his response to these lines? After all, Birney is talking about a bear. Is it fair to link his position to that of the men? And if so, does it matter that these are males, or just that animals and people have differing power? Is Sihota finding political comment that is not in the poem, or is his reading justified? The next paragraph amplifies the point that the men are living a life that is not "joyous," and "lurch" through life like the bear. No doubt most readers would agree that Birney makes this point, that the text lends support to Sihota's view.

The concluding paragraph effectively reasserts and clarifies Sihota's thesis, saying that all people live in a myth and are controlled by their masters and their societies. But Sihota restates his opinion that this problem is somehow special for men. Then he reiterates that the men are friends and suggests they may be lovers. In doing so, Sihota alters his thesis, suggesting that gay men are especially forced to live a "myth" that is not their own. The rest of the paragraph speaks about men in general again, but Sihota specifies that the freedom to "be with a friend, and to be different" is also denied to men—or, perhaps, to gay men. This may very well be true, and it is certainly possible to write an essay from a gay point of view. But the question is, has Sihota offered a response that is private? It is *his* response—and perhaps you share it. But perhaps you do not. Is this shading of his thesis argued convincingly? It certainly is argued, not merely asserted, but how convincing is the evidence? Has he helped you to enjoy the poem by seeing things that you may not have noticed—or has he said things that seem to you not to be in close contact with the poem as you see it? If so, is it because there is concrete evidence for his argument about men (or people) but less evidence (some might say no evidence) that these mates are gay? Sihota's observation about hegemonic controls on gay people is valuable, but is this the essay in which to develop it? It is important that you always question whether your interpretation is drawn from evidence in the work under study, or whether you are working out a concern of your own and forcing the writing to accommodate it. If you adopt various filters to view your texts (the filters we will discuss in Chapter 8), it is crucial that you first undertake a **CLOSE READING** of the text and ensure that your theoretical reading is entirely reasonable in terms of the evidence contained in the fictional text itself.

The documentation for this short essay on a short poem need not be overly elaborate. The opening paragraph informs us of the author and title, so we know that all references will be to this poem. You may wish to give a line number in the text, as Sihota does when he writes, "In line 13 the narrator says [. . .]." You may wish to indicate line numbers after quotations from the poem, but it is probably not necessary.

Remember: in a larger essay with more than one source, it is always necessary to indicate page and line numbers. If you are using line numbers,

indicate that fact in the first reference with the full word—(line 18)—and subsequently simply use the number. If you are using both line and page references for different texts, you must always indicate what each number signifies.

Two More Student Essays

Here are two other interpretations of the same poem. You will see that these two essays also develop specific theses and reflect opinions of their writers, but each works with the evidence of the poem carefully. These are good, brief analyses of the poem.

Notice that Ms. Gifford's title is actually a quotation from the poem; that is why it is contained in quotation marks. Her *own* title would not appear in quotation marks because this is not a published essay. Mr. Hawford's title contains his own words and a quotation; notice how it is punctuated.

Barbara Gifford

"These Spare Men of Kashmir"

Earle Birney's poem "The Bear on the Delhi Road" presents strong images of the captured bear and his captors. None seem very happy and all are, as Birney puts it, "tranced." These poor men of Kashmir are forced by poverty to bring a bear down from the "fabulous hills" with a "ring / in the great soft nose," but they are also on an "alien plain" and they must "prance" in "hot dust." Although the poem presents exotic images, it is really a poem about poverty and social injustice.

India is a society that has a strong caste system. Although modern India is developing and there is no doubt more opportunity for many people, there is still an enormous population of peasants and uneducated people trapped in centuries old beliefs and social systems. For these people, the modern world does not exist. Birney paints a vivid picture of the deprivation in which these men live: they are "bare," meaning partly dressed; they are "spindly," meaning thin; they are like "locusts," meaning they are insect-like. Birney says "it is no more joyous for them" than for the captive bear. They have been forced by economic necessity to give up their home, "in the shadows of deodars," which are aromatic and shady trees, and come down to the "clamorous world" of a more advanced India nearer to the

capital, Delhi. They are not participating in the urban life of Delhi, however, but out in the dusty plain. The actions of the men also show their low status. Although they are by nature "peaceful," they are tormenting the bear by flicking a stick at his eyes because their own poverty necessitates teaching him to dance. They have to keep out of the "praying claws / sharpened to paw for ants." They also have to keep out of the way of the modern world which is steamrollering its way forward without providing any economic security for people like these Kashmir peasants. Because they have no money, they have no power. They can only "lurch, lurch" forward to an uncertain future.

It is words like "lurch" and "tranced" and "spindly" that create the tone of despair and poverty. It is images like "beating the air / with his crooked arms," "the rolling eyes," to "wear, wear / from his shaggy body the tranced wish" that show how worn out and beaten down the bear and the men have become by their plight.

Earle Birney's poem presents foreign images, but the story he tells is true around the world and even in Canada. Poor people have no power and do whatever they can to survive. If they want to survive, they must attempt to exploit the even more disadvantaged, if any exist. For these men, the only thing lower is a bear. "The Bear on the Delhi Road" is a call for change. The tone of defeat suggests that these conditions cannot continue. The poor have reached the bottom rung and Birney helps us to see the injustice of that fact.

Exercises

1. What is the thesis of the essay?
2. Does the essayist offer convincing evidence to support the thesis?
3. Do you consider the essay to be well written, poorly written, or something in between? On what evidence do you base your opinion?

Ed Hawford

"The Tranced Dancing of Men": Living in Myth

Although on the surface there is nothing about religion in Earle Birney's "The Bear on the Delhi Road," the poem is, in fact, talking about the myths in which humans

live. There are social comments in this poem and economic ones, too, but the aim of the poem is to investigate the "tranced dancing of men," the power of religion and myth in human lives.

Right from the beginning, Birney introduces the idea of myth and tells us that the images he presents are "Unreal." It is powerful to begin a poem with the word unreal because it tells the reader that what is to follow is a story, but also that there is a parallel, unreal world to the world in which we live. In the real world, these men must capture and train a bear in order to make a poor living. But, in fact, they are as trapped as he is by their own belief systems.

We think that the human mind is very different from the mind of a bear. This bear doesn't know why he is captured; he just follows the "ring" in his "great soft nose." He can't help it. And he doesn't really dance, he just rears back and "lurches" to avoid a stick which the men "flick" at his eyes. He is being trained and he doesn't understand why. It is easy to see the comment on animal cruelty here, but the more important comment is that the bear is being forced to give up one "trance," his

> wish forever to stay
> only an ambling bear
> four-footed in berries

for another trance. In this new myth, the men will feed him and will not kill him if he performs for them. After a while, he will imagine this has always been his life and will have learned that jumping about brings food and water and no pain.

The men live a similar life, despite the human belief that we are "higher animals." They have also left one life in the "fabulous hills" and find themselves on an "alien plain." But while they know they must break down the will of the bear, "wear" him down, they don't realize that they live in a similar myth. Birney doesn't tell us what religion they

practice, but that isn't important. What is more important than the particular religion is the fact that they, like the bear, live in a set of myths, the myths that govern us as humans. Birney calls them the "tranced dancing of men." These men also don't understand; they are also pawns of larger forces. They aren't "joyous" and they, too, dance around in the dust and "prance," just like the bear. They are dancing to a set of beliefs that pulls them along by a metaphorical ring in the nose. They are in a sort of trance, but it is the trance in which we all live, a trance that says life is a certain way, that humans and animals occupy certain positions, that some people have money and live in the capital city while some must live in the dust and train dancing bears to survive. These men don't question the way they live; they just enter the trance and dance through it.

Birney says it is "not easy to free / myth from reality." These men are trapped in a hard reality, but they survive it by remaining "peaceful" in their trance. By training the bear to dance, they make him look human. But they only look human, themselves. Far from governing their own lives, they just dance. By repeating the word lurch Birney really drives home the point that human life is a stumbling, drugged existence. We "lurch" forward, half asleep and trained into a dance by our own myths and beliefs. Centuries of beliefs have worn down our "shaggy bodies" and taken away whatever "wish" we might have once had. Like "The Bear on the Delhi Road," human life is "unreal" and we are only trained "in the tranced dancing of men."

Exercises

1. What is the thesis of the essay?
2. Does the essayist offer convincing evidence to support the thesis?
3. Do you consider the essay to be well written, poorly written, or something in between? On what evidence do you base your opinion? What do you think of the variety of sentence lengths in this essay? Would you rewrite any sentences?

Suggestions for Further Reading

The entries on "interpretation" in the reference works listed at the end of Chapter 5 provide a good starting point, as does Steven Mailloux's entry on "interpretation" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (1990). You may next want to turn to a short, readable, and highly thoughtful book by Monroe Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism* (1970). Also of interest are E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), Paul B. Armstrong, *Conflicting Readings: Variety and Validity in Interpretation* (1990), and Umberto Eco, with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992). This last title includes three essays by Eco, with responses by Rorty, Culler, and Brooke-Rose, and a final "Reply" by Eco. See also Joseph Margolis, *Interpretation Radical but Not Unruly: The New Puzzle of the Arts and History* (1995); and *Texts and Textuality: Textual Instability, Theory, and Interpretation*, ed. Philip Cohen (1997).

7

What Is Evaluation?

Learning Objectives

When you've read this chapter, you should be able to

- differentiate between the evaluation and the criticism of texts;
- determine what standards you apply to your criticism;
- decide your opinion of the roles played by morality, truth, realism, and emotion in writing; and
- separate emotional from sentimental writing, evaluating the effectiveness of emotive writing.

CRITICISM AND EVALUATION

Most literary criticism is not concerned with evaluation even though, as noted previously, in ordinary usage *criticism* implies finding fault, and therefore implies evaluation—"this story is weak." Rather, it is chiefly concerned with *interpretation* (the setting forth of meaning) and with *analysis* (examination of relationships among the parts, or of causes and effects). For instance, an interpretation may argue that, in David Fennario's *Balconville*, the characters are victims of an unequal capitalistic economy, while an analysis may show how the symbolic setting of the play (the balconies of the tenement houses, which are the only vacation destination available to these workers in the heat of summer) contributes to the meaning. In our discussion of "What Is Literature?" we saw that an analysis of Phyllis Webb's "Non Linear" poem (pp. 70–72) called attention to the line breaks, which guide the reader to certain interpretations of the number of possible readings. We noticed that you can read these lines in (at least) two different ways:

> I have given up
> complaining

and noted that it makes a great deal of difference if you read the two lines as one grammatical unit or as two separate lines.

In our discussion, we did not worry about whether this poem deserves an A, B, or C, nor about whether it was better or worse than some other poem by Webb, or by some other writer. And, to repeat, if one reads books and

journals devoted to literary study, one finds chiefly discussions of meaning. For the most part, critics assume that the works they are writing about have value and are good enough to merit attention, and so critics largely concern themselves with other matters.

Evaluative Language and the Canon

Still, some critical writing is indeed concerned with evaluation—with saying that works are good or bad, dated or classic, major or minor. (The language need not be as explicit as these words are: evaluation can also be conveyed through words such as *moving, successful, effective, important*, or, on the other hand, *tedious, unsuccessful, weak*, and *trivial*.) In reviews of plays, books, movies, musical and dance performances, and films, professional critics usually devote much of their space to evaluating the work or the performance, or both. The reviewer seeks, finally, to tell readers whether to buy a book or a ticket—or to save their money and their time. In short, although in our independent reading we read what we like, and we need not argue that one work is better than another, the issue of evaluation is evident all around us.

ARE THERE CRITICAL STANDARDS?

One approach to evaluating a work of literature, or, indeed, to evaluating anything at all, is to rely on personal taste. This approach is evident in a statement such as "I don't know anything about sound poetry, but I know what I like." The idea is old, at least as old as the Roman saying, *De gustibus non est disputandum* ("There is no disputing tastes"). If we say, "This is a good work," or "This book is greater than that book," are we saying anything beyond "I like this" and "I like this better than that"? Are all expressions of evaluation really nothing more than expressions of taste? Most people believe that if there are such things as works of art, or works of literature, there must be standards by which they can be evaluated, just as most other things are evaluated by standards. The standards for evaluating a pair of scissors, for instance, are perfectly clear: They ought to cut cleanly, ought not to need frequent sharpening, and ought to feel comfortable in the hand. We may also want them to look nice (perhaps to be painted—or on the contrary to reveal stainless steel), and to be inexpensive, rustproof, and so on, but in any case we can easily state our standards. There are agreed-on standards for many categories, but the influence of personal taste and changing fashion is almost always lurking under the surface. There should be a standard for athletic performance, for example, but judging in figure skating suggests this standard is highly subjective. There is an agreed upon standard for fluency in language, for example, but in Canada today not everyone agrees upon what the standard language actually is in a multicultural society.

But what are the standards for evaluating literature? In earlier pages we have implied one standard: In a good work of literature, all of the parts

contribute to the whole, making a unified work. Some people would add that mere unity is not enough; a work of high quality must not only be unified but must also be complex. The writer is presenting a work of art, and when we read, we can see if the writer has successfully kept all of the juggler's clubs in the air. If, for instance, the stated content of the poem is mournful, yet the metre jingles, we can probably say that the performance is unsuccessful; at least one of the inept juggler's clubs is clattering on the floor. Here are some of the standards commonly set forth:

Personal taste
Truth, realism
Moral content
Aesthetic qualities

Let's look at some of these in detail.

Morality and Truth as Standards

"It is always a writer's duty to make the world better." Thus writes Dr. Samuel Johnson, in 1765, in his "Preface to Shakespeare." In this view, *morality* plays a large role; a story that sympathetically treated lesbian or gay love might be regarded as a bad story by a reader committed to a traditional Judeo-Christian perspective, or at least be thought less worthy than a story that celebrated heterosexual married love. On the other hand, readers adhering to other points of view might regard the story highly because, in such readers' views, it helps to educate people and thereby does something "to make the world better."

But there are obvious problems in determining value based on moral principles. A gay or lesbian story might strike even a reader with traditional values as a work that is effectively told, with believable and memorable characters, whereas a story of heterosexual married love might be unbelievable, awkwardly told, trite, sentimental, or whatever. (More about sentimentality in a moment.) How much value does one give to the ostensible content of the story, the obvious moral or morality, and how much value does one give to the artistry exhibited in telling the story?

People differ greatly about moral (and religious) issues. Edward FitzGerald's translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* suggests that God doesn't exist, or—perhaps worse—if He does exist, He doesn't care about us. That God does not exist is a view held by many moral people; it is also a view opposed by many moral people. The issue then may become a matter of *truth.* Does the value of the poem depend on which view is right? In fact, does a reader have to subscribe to FitzGerald's view to enjoy (and to evaluate highly) the following stanza from the poem, in which FitzGerald suggests that the pleasures of this world are the only paradise that we can experience?

A book of verses underneath the bough,
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread—and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness—
Oh, wilderness were paradise enow!

Some critics can give high value to a literary work only if they share its beliefs, if they think that the work corresponds to reality. They measure the work against their vision of the truth.

Other readers can highly value a work of literature that expresses ideas they do not believe, arguing that literature does not require us to believe in its views. Rather, this theory claims, literature gives a reader a strong sense of *what it feels like* to hold certain views—even though the reader does not share those views. Take, for instance, a **LYRIC POEM** in which Christina Rossetti (1830–94), a devout Anglican, expresses both spiritual numbness and spiritual hope. Here is one stanza from "A Better Resurrection":

> My life is like a broken bowl,
> A broken bowl that cannot hold
> One drop of water for my soul
> Or cordial in the searching cold;
> Cast in the fire the perished thing;
> Melt and remould it, till it be
> A royal cup for Him, my King:
> O Jesus, drink of me.

One need not be an Anglican suffering a crisis to find this poem of considerable interest. It offers insight into a state of mind, and the truth or falsity of religious belief is not at issue. Similarly, one can argue that although *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) is deeply a Roman Catholic work, the non-Catholic reader can read it with interest and pleasure because of (for example) its rich portrayal of a wide range of characters, the most famous of whom perhaps are the pathetic lovers Paolo and Francesca. In Dante's view, they are eternally damned because they were unrepentant adulterers, but a reader need not share this belief to appreciate his writing.

Other Ways to Think about Truth and Realism

Other solutions to the problem of whether a reader must share a writer's beliefs have been offered. One extreme view says that beliefs are irrelevant, since literature has nothing to do with truth. In this view, a work of art does not correspond to anything "outside" itself, that is, to anything in the real world. If a work of art has any "truth," it is only in the sense of being internally consistent. Thus Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, like, say, "Rock-a-bye Baby," isn't making assertions about reality. *Macbeth* has nothing to do with the history of Scotland, just as (in this view) Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* has nothing to do with the history of Rome, although Shakespeare borrowed some of his material from history books. These tragedies, like lullabies, are worlds in themselves—not to be judged against historical accounts of Scotland or Rome—and we are interested in the characters in the plays only as they exist *in the plays*. We may require, for instance, that the characters be consistent, believable, and engaging, but we cannot require that they correspond to historical figures. Literary works are neither true nor false; they are only (when successful) coherent and interesting. The poet William Butler Yeats perhaps

had in mind something along these lines when he said that you can refute a philosopher, but you cannot refute the song of sixpence. And indeed, "Sing a song of sixpence, / Pocket full of rye," has endured for a couple of centuries, perhaps partly because it has nothing to do with truth or falsity; it has created its own engaging world.

Many literary critics hold the view that we should not judge literature by how much it corresponds to our view of the world around us. For instance, some argue that there is no fixed, unchanging, "real" world around us; there is only what we perceive, what we ourselves "construct," and each generation, indeed each individual, constructs things differently. In this view, the reality to which literature has traditionally pointed is, itself, a kind of "text," a writing supported by a **METANARRATIVE** of history, social and religious custom, and human sexuality.

And yet one can object, offering a commonsense response or qualification: Surely when we see a play, or read an engaging work of literature, whether it is old or new, we feel that somehow the work says something about the life around us, the real world. True, some of what we read—let's say, detective fiction—is chiefly fanciful; we read it to test our wits, or to escape, or to kill time. But most literature seems to be connected somehow to life. This commonsense view, that literature is related to life, has an ancient history, and in fact almost everyone in the Western world believed it from the time of the ancient Greeks until the nineteenth century, and of course many people—including authors and highly skilled readers—still believe it today. The question to pose, perhaps, is the extent to which a material reality overlaps with a fictional reality (in a literary text) and the roles both play in the "text" of history and human relations.

The desire for accuracy characterizes much writing. Many novelists do a great deal of research, especially into the settings in which they will place their characters. And they are equally concerned with style—with the exactness of each word that they use. Flaubert is said to have spent a day writing a sentence and another day correcting it. The German author Rainer Maria Rilke has a delightful passage in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), in which he mentions someone who was dying in a hospital. The dying man heard a nurse mispronounce a word, and so (in Rilke's words) "he postponed dying." First he corrected the nurse's pronunciation, Rilke tells us, and "then he died. He was a poet and hated the approximate."

Certainly a good deal of literature, most notably the realistic short story and the novel, is devoted to giving a detailed picture that at least *looks like* the real world. One reason we read the fiction of Susanna Moodie is to find out what "the real world" of Upper Canada in the mid-nineteenth century was like—as seen through Moodie's eyes and class, of course. (One need not be a Marxist to believe, with Karl Marx, that one learns more about Industrial England from the novels of Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell than from economic treatises.) Writers of stories, novels, and plays are concerned about giving plausible, indeed precise and insightful, images of the relationships among people. Writers of lyric poems presumably are specialists in presenting human feelings—the experience of love, for instance, or of the loss of faith. And

presumably we are invited to compare the writer's created world to the world in which we live.

Even when a writer describes an earlier time, the implication is that the description is accurate, and especially that people *did* behave the way the writer says they did—and the way our own daily experience shows us that people do behave. Here is George Eliot at the beginning of her novel *Adam Bede* (1859):

> With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertook to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the 18th of June, in the year of Our Lord, 1799.

Why do novelists such as George Eliot give us detailed pictures, and cause us to become deeply involved in the lives of their characters? Another novelist, D. H. Lawrence, offers a relevant comment in the ninth chapter of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928):

> It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives. And here lies the vast importance of the novel, properly handled. It can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead. Therefore, the novel, properly handled, can reveal the most secret places of life [. . .].

In Lawrence's view, we can evaluate a novel in terms of its moral effect on the reader. The good novel, Lawrence claims, leads us into worlds—human relationships—that deserve our attention, and leads us away from "things gone dead," presumably relationships and values (whether political, moral, or religious) that no longer deserve to survive. To be blunt, Lawrence claims that good books improve us. His comment is similar to a more violent comment, quoted earlier, by Franz Kafka: "A book must be an ice-axe to break the frozen sea inside us." Again, not all critics hold this view today; thinkers reasonably ask what a verb like "improve" means in this context. "Improve" how, and in whose terms? Nonetheless, even quibbles are moral questions, so it seems that literature does, generally, incite moral response.

REALISM, of course, is not the writer's only tool. In *Gulliver's Travels,* Swift gives us a world of Lilliputians, people about six inches tall. Is his book pure fancy, unrelated to life? Not at all. We perceive that the Lilliputians are (except for their size) pretty much like ourselves, and we realize that their tiny stature is an image of human pettiness, an *un*realistic device that helps us to see the real world more clearly.

Some argue that, if a work distorts reality, the work is inferior. For example, some critics have charged that the "Rez plays" of Tomson Highway take up important issues of First Nations politics, but create poorly realized female characters who perpetuate stereotypes of Native women. One might reply, however, that in these plays distorted or exaggerated portraits of women (and men) aim to bring this very debate to the viewers' attention by creating a world that appears simultaneously real and fantastic. In this view, the

portraits are not poorly drawn because they do not exactly duplicate material reality; indeed, they are more complex and layered artistic creations. By playing with the spectators' views of reality, Highway asks his audience to consider the very issues to which these critics point.

The view that we have been talking about—that writers do connect us to the world—does not require realism, but it does assume that writers see, understand, and give us knowledge, thus deepening our understanding and perhaps even improving our characters.

As we said earlier, some critics believe that convincing portraits of a supposed reality actually point only to previous texts of a constructed reality. The issue is complex. To say that a work of literature is convincing (and to evaluate its success in these terms) is not to determine whether the reality against which it is being measured does or does not actually exist. It is to determine whether the writer can bring any given world to life. A writer of science fiction is not describing a real colony on a real planet, but we can remark on whether he or she manages to make the colonists appear true. In a similar manner, a writer like Lawrence can bring the northern English countryside to vivid life (and point to truisms in the human spirit in the process), but that does not mean that the real working-class men and women whom he copied were free of the "signifying practices"—the values and social systems—of their day. (For more on this complicated subject, you might want to read works by Michel Foucault or Michel de Certeau.)

Although we *need* not be concerned with an evaluation, we may *wish* to be concerned with it, and, if so, we will probably find, perhaps to our surprise, that in the very process of arguing our evaluation (perhaps only to ourselves) we are also interpreting and reinterpreting. That is, we find ourselves observing passages closely, from a new point of view, and we may therefore find ourselves seeing them differently, finding new meanings in them.

IS SENTIMENTALITY A WEAKNESS—AND IF SO, WHY?

The presence of **SENTIMENTALITY** is often regarded as a sign that a writer has failed to perceive accurately. Sentimentality is usually defined as excessive emotion, especially an excess of pity or sorrow. Today, feminist and other critics are resuscitating the term *sentimental*, especially as it has been used to denigrate domestic issues traditionally of concern to women or emotional responses previously thought appropriate only for women. But when one thinks about it, who is to say when an emotion is "excessive"?

Adam Gopnik relates an emotionally charged experience during his sojourn in Paris:

> [. . .] in Le Soufflé, on a Saturday afternoon in December, in the back room, with [his son] Luke sleeping in his *poussette*, and the old couple across the neighboring banquette, who had been coming for forty years, there with their small blind dog. The waiters in their white coats [. . .] and the smell (aroma is too fancy a word) of mingled cigarettes and orange liqueurs. I am aware that this is what is called sentimental, but then we went to Paris for a sentimental

re-education [. . .] even though the sentiments we were instructed in were not the ones we were expecting to learn, which I believe is why they call it an education.

—*Paris to the Moon* (New York, 2000) 18.

Gopnik, who is often quite acerbic elsewhere in the book, acknowledges that here he is enjoying piling image upon image to create a sensuous description that gains its effect precisely because it is sentimental. He *uses* the sentiment, you'll notice, to make his point about education—and that point actually turns back upon the sentiment to draw a realistic conclusion. And his love of the restaurant, *la vie Parisienne*, and his son seems genuine.

Perhaps it is more useful to ask whether the writer has captured a truly powerful emotion or is trotting out a stock emotion or a fake one. Or is making the level of sadness extreme but is not giving the reader the clues needed to empathize with the emotion, so it seems overdone. In other words, what each reader can say is that the *expression* of grief in a particular literary work is or is not successful, convincing, engaging, moving. Surely (to take an example) parents can be grief-stricken by the death of a child; just as surely they may continue to be grief-stricken for the rest of their lives. Consider the following poem by Eugene Field (1850–95):

LITTLE BOY BLUE

The little toy dog is covered with dust,
But sturdy and staunch he stands;
And the little toy soldier is red with rust,
And his musket moulds in his hands.
Time was when the little toy dog was new,
And the soldier was passing fair;
And that was the time when our Little Boy Blue
Kissed them and put them there.
"Now, don't you go till I come," he said,
"And don't you make any noise!"
So, toddling off to his trundle-bed,
He dreamt of the pretty toys;
And, as he was dreaming, an angel song
Awakened our Little Boy Blue—
Oh! the years are many, the years are long,
But the little toy friends are true!
Ay, faithful to Little Boy Blue they stand,
Each in the same old place—
Awaiting the touch of a little hand,
The smile of a little face;
And they wonder, as waiting the long years through
In the dust of that little chair,
What has become of our Little Boy Blue,
Since he kissed them and put them there.

Why do many readers find this poem sentimental, and of low quality? Surely not because it deals with the death of a child. Many other poems deal with this subject sympathetically, movingly, interestingly. Perhaps one sign of weak writing in "Little Boy Blue" is the insistence on the word *little.* The boy is little (five times, counting the title), the dog is little (twice), the toy soldier is little (once), the toys collectively are little (once), and Little Boy Blue has a "little face," a "little hand", and a "little chair." Repetition is not an inherently bad thing, but perhaps here we feel that the poet is too insistently tugging at our sympathy, endlessly asserting the boy's charm yet not telling us anything interesting about the child other than that he was little and that he loved his "pretty toys." (Gopnik uses a similar diminutive in describing the "small blind dog," but he only uses it once, and he avoids telling us anything sweet about his infant son except that he is asleep.) Real writers don't simply accept and repeat the greeting card view of reality. Children are more interesting than "Little Boy Blue" reveals, and adults react to a child's death in a more complex way.

Further, the boy's death is in no way described or explained. A poet of course is not required to tell us that the child died of pneumonia, or in an automobile accident, but since Field did choose to give us information about the death we probably want something better than the assertion that when a child dies it is "awakened" by an "angel song." We might ask ourselves if this is an interesting, plausible, healthy way of thinking of the death of a child. In talking about literature we want to be cautious about using the word "true," for reasons already discussed, but can't we say that Field's picture of childhood and his explanation of death simply don't ring true? Don't we feel that he is talking nonsense? And finally, can't we be excused for simply not believing that the speaker of the poem, having left the arrangement of toys undisturbed for "many" years, thinks that therefore "the little toy friends are true," and that they "wonder" while "waiting the long years through"? More nonsense. If we recall D. H. Lawrence's comment, we may feel that in this poem the poet has *not* properly directed "the flow of our sympathetic consciousness."

In other poems, the pain of death seems very honest. In such poems, mourners truly notice and feel the death, unlike the strangely absent parents of Little Boy Blue. Their reactions, however, are more balanced: The deceased person is not rendered perfect, and memories of loss are mixed with memories of both good and bad times. Death in a family, for example, often prompts recollections of the pain of living together as well as grief at the passing. In Field's poem, the death of the child is almost a beautiful thing, but real death more honestly involves pain and guilt and sometimes the lost opportunity to make amends between estranged people. A poem such as Miriam Waddington's "Ten Years and More" captures such mixed emotions brilliantly. Robertson Davies' *World of Wonders* (as an example from another genre) takes on the complex implications of the death of Boy Staunton, to which various characters react quite differently. The same complex of reactions is possible in a short poem, skillfully written.

Let us reconsider one more poem about death. In the last chapter, we read Patrick Lane's "The Children of Bogota." Here is an excerpt from that poem (the whole text is on page 80–81):

[. . .] Children? See those two in the gutter

behind that stall? I saw them put out
the eyes of a dog with thorns because
it barked at them. Tomorrow it could be you.
No one knows where they come from
but you can be sure they're not going.
In five years they'll be men and tired of killing
dogs. And when that happens you'll be the first
to cheer when the carabineros shoot them down.

The image of death here is of a dog, but it is very horrifying. (Consider the plight of this blinded dog and the privileged blind dog eating treats in Le Soufflé in Paris!) Not only is it graphic in its violence, but it depicts a totally unnecessary and cruel death. For this reason, the horrible possibility that "tomorrow it could be you" seems very real in its menace. It would be just as senseless and haphazard were the tourist to be killed. The possibility of violent death is everywhere in this poem; it is not a contained, literary contrivance as it is in "Little Boy Blue." The inevitable death of some of these street children is communicated not only by what the poem explicitly says but also by what it does not say, or, rather, by what it shows. While the tourists are saddened by the death of a dog, the speaker suggests they will not be sorry at the death of these children once they have grown up into dangerous men. Is the death of children a sadder spectacle than the death of adults? Is it even sadder to see these youths move almost inescapably toward an early death, barely to escape death in childhood only to die as young adults? Is the plainly stated juxtaposition of the deaths of an animal, of victims of crime and of the criminals themselves what makes death seem so real in this work? Yet can't we say that the poem communicates the sadness of the waste of human lives, without tearfully tugging at our sleeve? Don't we feel that although the poet sympathizes with these young men (and all others who resemble them), he nevertheless does not try to sweeten the facts and take us into an unreal Little-Boy-Blue world where we can feel good about our response to death? Lane does not sentimentalize; he looks without flinching, and he tells it straight. Perhaps we can even say that although these youths may be inventions in "The Children of Bogota," the poem is a fiction that speaks the truth.

No one can tell you how you should feel about these two poems, but ask yourself if you agree with some or all of what has been said about them. Also ask yourself on what standards you base your own evaluation of them. Perhaps one way to begin is to ask yourself which of the poems you would prefer to read if you were so unfortunate as to have lost a child, or a spouse, or to hear of the death of any young person. Then explain *why* you answered as you did.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Most of the reference works cited at the end of the discussion of "What Is Literature?" (page 76) include entries on "evaluation." But for additional short discussions see Chapter 18 ("Evaluation") in René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 2nd ed. (1948); Chapter 5 ("On Value-Judgments") in Northrop Frye, *The Stubborn Structure* (1970); and Chapter 4 ("Evaluation") in John M. Ellis, *The Theory of Literary Criticism* (1974). For a longer discussion, see Chapters 10 and 11 ("Critical Evaluation" and "Aesthetic Value") in Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (1958). Also of interest is Joseph Strelka, ed., *Problems of Literary Evaluation* (1969). In Strelka's collection, you may find it best to begin with the essays by George Boas, Northrop Frye, and David Daiches, and then to browse in the other essays. For a discussion of new theories of sentimentality, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

8

Writing about Literature: An Overview

Learning Objectives

When you've read this chapter, you should be able to

- appreciate that contemporary critics employ various perspectives or filters when they read;
- define the following types of criticism: formalist, deconstructive, reader-response, archetypal, Marxist, New Historicist, biographical, psychological, feminist, gay and lesbian, and post-colonial; and
- employ some aspects of these critical approaches in your own reading of texts.

THE NATURE OF CRITICAL WRITING

In everyday talk, the commonest meaning of **CRITICISM** is something like "finding fault." And to be critical is to be censorious. But a critic can see excellences as well as faults. Because we turn to criticism with the hope that the critic has seen something we have missed, the most valuable criticism is not that which shakes its finger at faults but that which calls our attention to interesting things going on in the work of art.

SOME CRITICAL APPROACHES

Whenever we talk about a work of literature, or even about a movie or television show, what we say depends in large measure on certain conscious or unconscious assumptions that we make: "I liked it; the characters were very believable" (here the assumption is that characters ought to be believable); "I didn't like it; there was too much violence" (here the assumption is that violence ought not to be shown, or if it is shown it should be made abhorrent); "I didn't like it; it was boring" (here the assumption is that there ought to be a fair amount of fast-paced physical action and changes of scene, rather than characters just talking). Whether we realize it or not, we judge the work from a particular viewpoint.

Professional critics, too, work from assumptions, but their assumptions are usually highly conscious, and the critics may define their assumptions at length. They read texts through the lens of a particular theory, and their

focus enables them to see things that otherwise might go unnoticed. It should be added, however, that if a lens or critical perspective or interpretative strategy helps us to see certain things, it also limits our vision. Many critics therefore regard their method not as an exclusive way of thinking but only as a useful tool.

What follows is a brief survey of the chief current approaches to literature. You may find, as you read these pages, that one or another approach sounds especially congenial, and you may therefore want to make use of it in your reading and writing. On the other hand, it's important to remember that works of literature are highly varied, and we read them for various purposes—to kill time, to enjoy fanciful visions, to be amused, to explore alien ways of feeling, and to learn about ourselves. It may be best to respond to each text in the way that the text seems to require rather than to read all texts according to a single formula. You'll find, of course, that some works will lead you to think about them from several angles. A play by Shakespeare may stimulate you to read a book about the Elizabethan playhouse, and another that offers a Marxist interpretation of the English Renaissance, and still another that offers a feminist analysis of Shakespeare's plays. All of these approaches, and others, may help you to deepen your understanding of the literary works that you read. There is no "correct" way to read.

Formalist Criticism (New Criticism)

FORMALIST CRITICISM emphasizes the work as an independent creation, a self-contained unity, something to be studied in itself—not as part of some larger context, such as the author's life or an historical period. This kind of study is called *formalist criticism* because the emphasis is on the *form* of the work, the relationships between the parts—the construction of the plot, the contrasts between characters, the functions of rhymes, the point of view, and so on. Formalist critics are concerned to show how particular words in a particular order create unique, complex structures that set forth particular meanings.

Cleanth Brooks, a distinguished American formalist critic, in an essay in the *Kenyon Review* (1951), set forth what he called his "articles of faith":

> That literary criticism is a description and an evaluation of its object.
> That the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity—the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole.
> That the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed, those of logic.
> That in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated.
> That form is meaning.

Formalist criticism is, in essence, intrinsic criticism, rather than extrinsic, for it concentrates on the work itself, independent of its writer and the writer's background—that is, independent of biography, psychology, sociology, and history. The discussions of a proverb ("A rolling stone") and of a short, "non-linear" poem by Phyllis Webb in Chapter 5 are brief examples. The gist is that a work of literature is complex, unified, and freestanding. In fact, of

course, we usually bring outside knowledge to the work. For instance, a reader who is familiar with, say, *Hamlet*, can hardly study some other tragedy by Shakespeare without bringing to the second play some conception of what Shakespearean tragedy is or can be. A reader of Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* inevitably brings unforgettable outside material (perhaps the experience of being an Indo-Canadian, or at least some knowledge of immigration) to the literary work. It is very hard to talk only about *Hamlet* or *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and not at the same time talk about, or at least have in mind, aspects of human experience.

FORMALIST CRITICISM, of course, begins with a personal response to the literary work, but it goes on to try to account for the response by a CLOSE READING of the work. It assumes that the author shaped the poem, play, or story so fully that the work guides the reader's responses. The assumption is that the "meaning" lies in the work itself. But, in fact, formalist critics approached their texts with a set of expectations and assumptions, so it may well be that the criticism of F. R. Leavis and the NEW CRITICS in America did not arise as objectively from the text as they may have believed it to do. Many literary critics today, in fact, argue that the active or subjective reader (or even what Judith Fetterley, a feminist critic, has called "the resisting reader"), and not the author of the text, makes the meaning. Still, even if one grants that the reader is active, one can hold with the formalists that the author is active, too, constructing a text that in some measure controls the reader's responses. Of course, during the process of writing about our responses we may find that our responses change. A formalist critic would say that we see with increasing clarity what the work is really like, and what it really means. Those who have moved away from formalism would argue that we have entered a process in which we "write" the text by rereading it and finding more and more connections between it and other of our experiences. Formalist criticism assumes that a work of art is stable; many contemporary critical approaches do not. An artist constructs a coherent, comprehensible work, the formalists say, thus conveying to a reader an emotion or an idea. T. S. Eliot said that the writer can't just pour out emotions onto the page. Rather, Eliot said in an essay entitled "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919), "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of the *particular* emotion." Contemporary critics, on the other hand, notice contradictions and multiple meanings, so their criticism may, itself, be provisional and undecided and still be useful.

In practice, formalist criticism usually takes one of two forms, either EXPLICATION (the unfolding of MEANING, line by line or even word by word) or ANALYSIS (the examination of the relations of parts). The essay on Yeats's "The Balloon of the Mind" (Chapter 12) is an explication, a setting forth of the implicit meanings of the words. The essay on Judith Thompson's *Lion in the Streets* (Chapter 11) is an analysis. The three essays on Birney's "The Bear on the Delhi Road" (Chapter 6) are chiefly analyses but with some passages of explication.

Formalist criticism, also called the **NEW CRITICISM** (to distinguish it from the historical and biographical writing that in earlier decades had dominated

literary study), began to achieve prominence in the late 1920s, and was the dominant form from the late 1930s until about 1970. American NEW CRITICS looked for a moral order in the work they studied and, some people argue, chose short lyrics and other works that would provide evidence for what they had preconceived. British formalist critics did not study the text as closely, nor with the same objectives. Canadian criticism until about 1970 tended to be a mix of these two related approaches. Today, most students still employ the approach when beginning to study a work of literature. Formalist criticism can empower a student by allowing an immediate confrontation with the work, and removing the need to first spend days reading related background material. On the other hand, you should neither assume that the text in front of you is complete within itself, nor that there is a "correct" way to decode it. Outside reading and your own experience are valuable critical tools that you should learn to use and to trust. We provide a case study of a research project based in historical and political research in Chapter 16.

Deconstruction

DECONSTRUCTION begins with the assumptions that language is unstable, elusive, unfaithful. (Language is all of these things because meaning is largely generated by opposition: "Hot" means something in opposition to "cold," but a hot day may be 30 degrees whereas a hot oven is at least 200 degrees; and a "hot item" may be of any temperature—indeed, a "hot" item can be "cool.") Deconstructionists seek to show that a literary work (usually called "a text" or "a discourse") inevitably is self-contradictory. Unlike formalist critics, deconstructionists hold that a work has no coherent meaning at the centre. Jonathan Culler, in *On Deconstruction* (1982), says that "to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts" (86). (Johnson and Culler provide accessible introductions, but the major document is Jacques Derrida's seminal, and difficult work, *Of Grammatology* 1967, trans. 1976). Derrida believed that language is a system of signs without fixed meaning, to which we have arbitrarily assigned unified meaning in an effort to locate a "centre." He uses the term LOGOCENTRIC for this attitude. A **SIGN**, or SIGNIFIER, is the marker that points to a signified that stands for an original referent (a "real" thing.) Derrida and others point out, however, that the signified is itself a signifier of an earlier signified in an infinite chain. Derrida wittily created the term *différance* (which, in French carries both the meanings "to defer" and "difference") to suggest that words in this chain are distinct from others but defer meaning to the earlier sign. As a result, texts are "indeterminate," "open," and "unstable."

Deconstructionist interpretations share with various POSTSTRUCTURALIST theories the idea that authors are "socially constructed" from the "discourses of power" or "signifying practices" that surround them. Deconstructionists "interrogate" a text, using a double reading. They try to show what the author selected to order the text—sometimes in a straightforward explication—and then show the contradictions and gaps that prevent the text from becoming a neat, closed universe. (A good example of such a reading is Jennifer Harvie's

article on Thompson's play: "Constructing Fictions of an Essential Reality, or 'This Pickshur is Niiiice': Judith Thompson's *Lion in the Streets*," *Theatre Research in Canada* 13 (1992): 81–93.) In this way, deconstruction—like the New Criticism—encourages close, rigorous attention to the text. Furthermore, in its rejection of the claim that a work has a single stable meaning, deconstruction has had a positive influence on the study of literature. A problem with deconstruction, however, is that too often it can be reductive, telling the same story about every text—that here, yet again, and again, we see how a text is incoherent and heterogeneous. Deconstructionists are aware that their emphasis on the instability of language implies that their own texts are unstable or even incoherent. Taken to the limit, deconstruction implies that no language can contain meaning and, therefore, that criticism itself cannot hold meaning. But in practice, the sense of INDETERMINANCY in their criticism allows most such critics freedom to push the limits of their readings, to explore what Derrida calls "the free play of signification." They exuberantly multiply meanings, and to this end they may use PUNS, IRONY, **ALLUSIONS**, and **INTERTEXTUAL** elements somewhat as a poet might. Such criticism can become a form of art itself. Indeed, for many deconstructionists, the traditional conception of "literature" is merely an elitist "construct." All "texts" or "discourses" (novels, scientific papers, a Barbie doll, watching TV, suing in court) are similar in that all are unstable systems of signifying, all are fictions, all are "literature."

Reader-Response Criticism

Probably all reading includes some sort of response—"This is terrific"; "This is a bore"; "I don't know what's going on here"—and probably almost all writing about literature begins with some such response, but specialists in literature disagree greatly about the role that response plays, or should play, in experiencing literature and in writing about it.

At one extreme are those who say that our response to a work of literature should be a purely aesthetic response—a response to a work of art—and not the response we would have to something comparable in real life. To take an obvious point: If in real life we heard someone plotting a murder, we would intervene, perhaps by calling the police or by attempting to warn the victim. But when we hear Macbeth and Lady Macbeth plot to kill King Duncan, we watch with deep interest; we hear their words with pleasure, and maybe we even look forward to seeing the murder and to seeing what the characters then will say and what will happen to the murderers.

When you think about it, the vast majority of the works of literature do not have a close, obvious resemblance to the reader's life. Most readers of *Macbeth* are not Scots, and no readers are Scottish kings or queens. (It's not just a matter of older literature: no readers of Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* were present with Noah during the Flood.) The connections readers make between themselves and the lives in most of the books they read are not, on the whole, connections based on ethnic or professional identities, but, rather, connections with states of consciousness. For instance, a

reader may share a sense of isolation from the family, or a sense of joy or guilt for sexual experiences. Before we reject a work either because it seems too close to us ("I'm a woman and I don't like the depiction of this woman"), or on the other hand too far from our experience ("I'm not a woman, so how can I enjoy reading about these women?"), we probably should try to follow the advice of Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), who said, "Do not dictate to your author; try to become him." Nevertheless, some literary works of the past may today seem intolerable, at least in part. There are passages in nineteenth-century Canadian literature that deeply upset us today. We should, however, try to reconstruct the cultural assumptions of the age in which the work was written. If we do so, we may find that if in some ways it reflected its age, in other ways it challenged that culture.

READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM, then, says that the "meaning" of a work is not merely something put into the work by the writer; rather, the "meaning" is an interpretation created or constructed or produced by the reader as well as the writer. In *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), Stanley Fish, an early exponent of reader-response theory, puts it this way: "Interpretation is not the art of construing but of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them" (327).

Critics who use this approach differ. At one extreme, the reader is said to construct or reconstruct the text under the firm guidance of the author. That is, the author so powerfully shapes or constructs the text—encodes an idea—that the reader is virtually compelled to perceive or reconstruct or decode it the way the author wants it to be perceived. (We can call this view the **OBJECTIVE VIEW**, since it essentially holds that readers look objectively at the work and see what the author put into it.) At the other extreme, the reader constructs the meaning according to his or her own personality—that is, according to the reader's psychological identity. (We can call this view the SUBJECTIVE VIEW, since it essentially holds that readers inevitably project their feelings into what they perceive.) An extreme version of the subjective view holds that there is no such thing as literature; there are only texts, some of which some readers regard in a particular way. How to reconcile these extremes?

It seems clear that all writers carefully select what they hope is the exactly correct word for the exactly correct spot for some particular reason, but there are always GAPS OR INDETERMINACIES, to use the words of Wolfgang Iser. Readers always go beyond the text, drawing inferences and evaluating the text in terms of their own experience. To return to Phyllis Webb's poem "Propositions," which we discussed in Chapter 4, we saw that the word *just* has a number of meanings. Each reader can assign one (or more) of these meanings and each will alter the reading of the poem. If the sense of "justified, with justice" is taken, the "passion" that is being proposed is quite different than if the sense of "only, or simply" is taken. Doubtless much depends on the reader, and there is no doubt that readers "naturalize"—make natural, according to their own ideas—what they read. But does every reader see his or her individual image in each literary work? A contemporary Canadian of Asian heritage may well be able to "see herself" in the company of the British immigrant Susanna Moodie, and her experience will colour her reading of this

nineteenth-century story of immigration, but can the same woman "see herself" among the male hockey players of Rick Salutin's *Les Canadiens* (1977)?

Many people who subscribe to one version or another of reader-response theory would agree that they are concerned not with all readers but with what they call INFORMED READERS or COMPETENT READERS. Such readers are familiar with the conventions of literature. They understand, for instance, that in a play such as *Hamlet* the characters usually speak in **VERSE**. Such readers, then, do not express amazement that Hamlet often speaks metrically, and that he sometimes uses rhyme. These readers understand that verse is the normal language for most of the characters in the play, and therefore such readers do not characterize Hamlet as a poet. Informed, competent readers, in short, know the rules of the game; a writer works within a "landscape" that is shared by readers. As readers, we are familiar with various kinds of literature, and we read or see *Hamlet* as a particular kind of literary work, a tragedy, a play that evokes (in Shakespeare's words) "woe or wonder." Knowing (to a large degree) how we *ought* to respond, our responses are not merely private. Some critics, however, like Carolyn R. Miller (in "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 10 [1984]: 151–67) argue that genre, therefore, becomes one of the ways institutions wield power; READER-RESPONSE criticism can, to some extent, free the reader of such control.

Archetypal (or Myth) Criticism

Carl G. Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, in *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (1928), postulates the existence of a "collective unconscious," an inheritance in our brains consisting of "countless typical experiences [such as birth, escape from danger, selection of a mate] of our ancestors." Few people today believe in an inherited "collective unconscious," but many people agree that certain repeated experiences, such as going to sleep and hours later awakening, or the perception of the setting and of the rising sun, or of the annual death and rebirth of vegetation, manifest themselves in dreams, myths, and literature—in these instances, as stories of apparent death and rebirth. These universal experiences and symbols are called **ARCHETYPES**. For example, the archetypal plot of death and rebirth may be seen in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.* The ship suffers a deathlike calm and then is miraculously restored to motion, and, in a sort of parallel rebirth, the mariner moves from spiritual death to renewed perception of the holiness of life. Another archetypal plot is the quest, which usually involves the testing and initiation of a **HERO**, and thus essentially represents the movement from innocence to experience. In addition to archetypal plots, there are archetypal characters, since an archetype is any recurring unit of significant importance to human stories. Among archetypal characters are the Hero (saviour, deliverer—about whom Joseph Campbell writes extensively), the Scapegoat, the Terrible Mother (witch, stepmother—even the wolf "grandmother" in the tale of Little Red Riding Hood), the binary Madonna/Whore and a series of other versions of the Woman, the Wise Old Man (father figure, magician), the Sleeping Prince, and others.

Because, the theory holds, both writer and reader share unconscious memories, the tale an author tells (derived from the collective unconscious) may strangely move the reader, speaking to his or her collective unconscious. As Maud Bodkin puts it, in *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934), something within us "leaps in response to the effective presentation in poetry of an ancient theme" (4). But this emphasis on ancient (or repeated) themes has made archetypal criticism vulnerable to the charge that it is reductive. The critic looks for certain characters or PATTERNS OF ACTION, and values the work if the motifs are there, meanwhile overlooking what is unique, subtle, distinctive, and truly interesting about the work. A second weakness in some archetypal criticism is that in the search for the deepest meaning of a work the critic may crudely impose a pattern, seeing (for instance) The Quest in every walk down the street.

Although archetypal criticism is less often used today, it is nevertheless true that one of its strengths is that it invites us to use comparisons, and comparing is often an excellent way to see not only what a work shares with other works but what is distinctive in the work. The most successful practitioner of archetypal criticism was the late Northrop Frye (1912–91), whose numerous books help readers see fascinating connections among works. Frye, who was a professor at the University of Toronto, has had an enormous impact on Canadian criticism. Some current critics accuse Frye of attempting to fit Canadian literature to the patterns he found in European and Classical literature, charging that his way of seeing patterns prevented early critics from seeing something unique or indigenous in our writing. For Frye's explicit comments about archetypal criticism, as well as for examples of such criticism in action, see especially his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and *The Educated Imagination* (1964).

Marxist Criticism

A school of criticism based largely in the writings of Karl Marx (1818–83) and developed particularly in the 1930s took Marx's name. **MARXIST CRITICISM** today is varied, but essentially it sees history primarily as a struggle between socio-economic classes, and it sees literature as the product of its period, specifically as the product of economic forces. For Marxists, economics is the "base" or "infrastructure"; on this base rests a "superstructure" of ideology (law, politics, philosophy, religion, and the arts, including literature), reflecting the interests of the dominant class. Thus, literature can be seen within this perspective as a material product, produced in order to be consumed in a given society. Marxist critics reject notions of "masterpiece" or "genius," asserting that these notions are part of a bourgeois myth of the individual that detaches the text from its economic context. (Joining these ideas, some critics employ terms that link aesthetic perceptions to economic concepts, terms like the SPECTATORIAL ECONOMY and others.) In this view, like every other product, literature is the product of work, and it does work. A bourgeois society, for example, will produce literature that in one way or another celebrates bourgeois values. In the 1930s, critics such as the American

Granville Hicks asserted that the novel must show the class struggle. (Canadian writers such as dramatist David Fennario present such struggles in explicitly Marxist terms and critics of Fennario's plays must either agree with his position or challenge it—producing a kind of Marxist critique in either case.) Such a doctrinaire view, however, has not been much seen in Marxist criticism since World War II. More recent Marxist critics treat the text as a special kind of document that allows a reader to stand apart and view a society. The criticisms, of course, must follow the overall ideology of Marx, though this too has been variously treated. Today, many Marxist critics have responded to POSTSTRUCTURALIST criticism and now regard the text itself as a form of ideology. Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey, and Terry Eagleton are critics who have been very influential in theorizing literature itself from a Marxist perspective. Few critics of any sort would disagree that works of art in some measure reflect the age that produced them, but most contemporary Marxist critics go further. They assert—in a repudiation of what has been called "'vulgar' Marxist theory"—that the deepest historical meaning of a literary work is to be found in what it does *not* say, what its ideology does not permit it to express. Macherey, for example, looks to the GAPS in texts to reveal to the reader what the text hides; Althusser looks for contradictions in the text, which occur when the ideology that supports the writing fails. While dedicated Marxists use such readings to call for change, many non-Marxists also use this form of criticism—Marxist criticism informs many later critical schools. For these critics, the approach allows the critic to stand outside the received values of a society and interrogate its foundations. For an introduction to Marxist criticism, see Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976).

Historical Criticism

HISTORICAL CRITICISM studies a work within its historical context. Thus, a student of *Julius Caesar, Hamlet,* or *Macbeth*—plays in which ghosts appear—may try to find out about Elizabethan attitudes toward ghosts. We may find, for instance, that the Elizabethans took ghosts more seriously than we do, or, on the other hand, we may find that ghosts were explained in various ways, sometimes as figments of the imagination and sometimes as shapes taken by the devil in order to mislead the virtuous. Similarly, an historical essay concerned with *Othello* may be devoted to Elizabethan attitudes toward Moors, or to Elizabethan ideas of love, or to Elizabethan ideas of a daughter's obligations toward her father's wishes concerning her suitor. The historical critic assumes that writers, however individualistic, are shaped by the particular social contexts in which they live. One can put it this way: The goal of historical criticism is to understand how people in the past thought and felt. It assumes that such understanding can enrich our understanding of a particular work. The assumption is, however, disputable, since one may argue that the artist—let's say Shakespeare—may *not* have shared the age's view on this or that. All of the half-dozen or so Moors in Elizabethan plays other than *Othello* are villainous or foolish, but this evidence, one can argue, does not prove that Othello is, therefore, villainous or foolish. Fewer literary critics today

use quite this type of historical approach. Most critics—like most historians—now use a form of "New Historicism."

The New Historicism

Since about 1980, a school of scholarship called the **NEW HISTORICISM** has become a widespread approach to study. New Historicism holds that there is no "history" in the sense of a narrative of indisputable past events. Rather, there is only our version—our narrative, our representation—of the past. Here is an example: In the nineteenth century and in the twentieth, almost up to 1992, Columbus was represented as the heroic benefactor of humankind who discovered the New World. But even while plans were being made to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of his first voyage across the Atlantic, voices were raised in protest: Columbus did not "discover" a new world; after all, the indigenous people knew where they were, and it was Columbus who was lost, since he thought he was in India. Similarly, ancient Greece, once celebrated by historians as the source of democracy and rational thinking, is now more often regarded as a society that was built on slavery and on the oppression of women. The history of the Christian church is being reconsidered in the light of modern attitudes toward women, human sexuality, and many other issues.

In some ways, NEW HISTORICISM was a reaction against DECONSTRUCTION, but like most POSTSTRUCTURALIST criticisms it shares many of DECONSTRUCTION's ideas about language. The British critic Raymond Williams has been highly influential, developing a school of criticism called CULTURAL MATERIALISM, which is much like New Historicism and shares with it a sense that the study of the past is not isolated. New historicists try to read history in light of their commitments to various projects in the present. In Stephen Greenblatt's words:

> Writing that was not engaged, that withheld judgments, that failed to connect the present with the past seemed worthless. Such connection could be made either by analogy or causality; that is, a particular set of historical circumstances could be represented in such a way as to bring out homologies with aspects of the present or, alternatively, those circumstances could be analyzed as the generative forces that led to the modern condition. (*Learning to Curse* 167)

Perhaps most influential in the development of NEW HISTORICISM is the work of Michel Foucault, who re-examined the idea of the self by a rereading of history. It would be impossible to overestimate the importance of Foucault's work in contemporary criticism. After him, almost all critics have regarded history differently, looking not simply at political events, but at agencies of power (Foucault speaks of "strategies of power") and attempts to impose or subvert that power.

On the NEW HISTORICISM, see H. Aram Veeser, ed., *The New Historicism* (1989) and *The New Historicism Reader* (1994). For an excellent application of the method, see Ric [Richard Paul] Knowles, "Voices (off): Deconstructing the Modern English-Canadian Dramatic Canon," or Denis Salter, "The Idea of a National Theatre" both in Robert Lecker, ed., *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value* (1991).

Biographical Criticism

One kind of historical research is the study of *biography*, which for our purposes includes not only biographies but also autobiographies, diaries, journals, letters, and so on. What experiences did (for example) Susanna Moodie undergo? Are all of the hardships of women pioneers in Prairie fiction true to the real lives of such women? The really good biographies not only tell us about the life of the author but they enable us to return to the literary texts with a deeper understanding of how they came to be what they are. The diaries of Virginia Woolf, for example, throw wonderful light on this complex woman and her equally complex writing. A fascinating example of biography mixing with fiction is the work of Frederick Philip Grove who, in 1927, published *A Search for America,* claiming it to be a revision of a draft from 1894. The book came to be regarded as an autobiography of this early Canadian settler. Douglas Spettigue, however, has shown that the book was written as late as 1920 and is not, in fact, autobiographical. Such literary detective work warns us about taking biographies too literally and reminds that all writing (as the New Historicists suggest) is a mix of fact and fantasy.

Psychological (or Psychoanalytic) Criticism

PSYCHOLOGICAL or **PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM** developed from the framework of Freudian psychology. Recently, psychological criticism has become widespread, partly as a result of twentieth century interest in psychology, partly because such study connects with other poststructural criticisms, partly because it offers a theoretical explanation of human responses to art.

A central doctrine of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) is the Oedipus complex, the view that all males unconsciously wish to displace their fathers and to sleep with their mothers. According to Freud, hatred of the father and love of the mother, normally repressed, may appear disguised in dreams.

A classic example of psychological biography read into literature is Ernest Jones's *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949). Amplifying some comments by Freud, Jones argues that Hamlet delays killing Claudius because Claudius (who has killed Hamlet's father and married Hamlet's mother) has done exactly what an Oedipal Hamlet himself wanted to do. For Hamlet to kill Claudius, then, would be to kill himself. Jones influenced the famous film version of the play with Lawrence Olivier and almost all productions of *Hamlet* since have explored an Oedipal relationship (consider, for example, the overt sexuality of the Mel Gibson version with Glenn Close as the mother).

Jungian criticism, which we discussed earlier, is an evolution from some of Freud's ideas. Even more important recently has been the work of the French neo-Freudian, Jacques Lacan, whose theories have attracted many literary and film critics. In Lacan, Freud is reinterpreted in terms of language, the preoccupation with sexual repression and the "id," and the idea of the self. Lacan believes there is no unified self, that the inner being (the *je*) seeks to see itself, seeing instead images of an ideal self (the *moi*) which forever disappear. As a result, we "suture," or sew together, an image of self that mixes the ideal with the symbolic. For film critics, such a view of the **GAZE**

and the self has been highly suggestive. Lacan bases his ideas in a "phallocentric" view of language and the nature of thought: Some feminists argue against Lacan as a result; some employ his theories; some use them to work against themselves. The question is how we define what Lacan calls the *phallus*, by which he does not mean the penis. Is such an agency of (male) power at the base of our ideas of self, or is this a notion left over from Freud's preoccupation with the genitals and, particularly, with male sexuality? Lacanian criticism is asking some very important questions about the nature of human perception, self, and society. It also asks whether males and females read the same way.

Feminist Criticism

FEMINIST CRITICISM can be traced back through the work of Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949), Virginia Woolf (chiefly *A Room of One's Own*, 1928), the efforts of the suffragettes at the turn of this century, the earlier writing of Mary Wollenstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792) and much earlier to the writings of such women as Margery Kempe and Hildegard von Bingen. But a major impetus was the Women's Movement of the 1960s. The call for a reappraisal of the position of women resulted—in literary studies—in work such as *Sexual Politics* (1970), by Kate Millet, which called attention to the misogynist attitudes in canonical literature. There was also a new appreciation for women's literature and female writers, many of whom were shown to have been undervalued by a society that values men. Feminists have argued that certain forms of writing have been especially the province of women—for instance journals, diaries, and letters; and predictably, these forms have not been given adequate space in the traditional, male-oriented canon. As well, many female writers who were known in their day were forgotten as the canon formed. (Consider, as Anne K. Mellor points out, our view of Romanticism based on five male writers [see *Romanticism and Feminism*, 1988.]) In 1972, in an essay entitled "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," the poet and essayist Adrienne Rich effectively summed up the matter:

> A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh. [. . .] We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.

The Women's Movement initially argued that women and men are very similar and therefore should be treated equally. Later feminist criticism emphasized and explored the differences between men and women. Because the experiences of the sexes are different, the argument goes, their values and sensibilities are different, and their responses to literature are different. By the 1980s, however, feminist discussions had become widely varied.

Works written by women are seen by some feminist critics as embodying the experiences of a minority culture—a group marginalized by the dominant

male culture; some critics, therefore, place political issues at the forefront. Some critics, like Judith Fetterley in 1978, argued that women should resist the meanings (that is, the visions of how women ought to think or behave) that male authors—or female authors who have inherited patriarchal values—bury in their books. Fetterley pointed out that the canon "insists on its universality in specifically male terms." Fetterley argued that a woman must read as a woman, "exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in women." In resisting the obvious meanings—for instance, the false claim that male values are universal values—women may discover more significant meanings. Fetterley (who was also a reader-response critic) began a debate that has since opened the canon. (It is important to note that it is not only women who have been underrepresented in the canon: so have racial and other minorities.)

Other feminist critics explore more theoretical questions of the very nature of women and men. French theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hèléne Cixous used (and reacted against) Lacan and Derrida, attempting to find a new way to write outside a patriarchal structure. They argued for an *ÉCRITURE FÉMININE*, a "feminine writing."

The work of Michel Foucault has influenced another school of feminist critics who seek to redefine gender and to examine the role of social agencies in the construction of the category "the woman." North American feminism tends more toward this position than toward the reconsidered language of French feminism. Recent criticism by feminist and gay critics has suggested that all gender is a **PERFORMATIVE**, an act of construction. The ideas of Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990, and the 1993 *Bodies That Matter*, discussed later) have been highly influential in this debate. The point is that critics disagree as to whether gender is "materialist" or constructed, though most thinkers today agree that historical and cultural context affects how women and men see themselves and, therefore, how they read and write. At this point it should also be said that some theorists, who hold that identity is socially constructed, strongly dispute the value of establishing "essentialist" categories such as *woman* or *man*, *gay* or *lesbian*—a point we will consider in the next section.

In Canada, Barbara Godard has called for "ex-centric" readings—readings that move from (*ex*) the centre and are "eccentric" or idiosyncratic. (See Godard, "Ex-centriques, Eccentric, Avant-Garde," *Room of One's Own* 8 [1984] and also Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 1987.) Susan Bennett urges female writers to "endeavour to destabilize the complacency of spectators who are terrifyingly well trained to conduct their own silent surveillance" (*Canadian Theatre Review* 76 [1993]: 39). Today, FEMINIST CRITICISM influences every other kind of criticism and has fundamentally altered the way we look at ourselves and, therefore, at our art.

Lesbian and Gay Criticism

LESBIAN AND GAY CRITICISM have their roots in FEMINIST CRITICISM; that is, FEMINIST CRITICISM introduced many of the questions that these other, newer developments are now exploring.

In 1979, in a book called *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence,* Adrienne Rich reprinted a 1975 essay on Emily Dickinson, "Vesuvius at Home." In her new preface to the reprinted essay she said that a lesbian-feminist reading of Dickinson would not have to prove that Dickinson slept with another woman. Rather, lesbian-feminist criticism "will ask questions hitherto passed over; it will not search obsessively for heterosexual romance as the key to a woman artist's life and work" (157–58). Obviously such a statement is also relevant to a male artist's life and work.

Lesbian criticism and gay criticism are not symmetrical. Lesbian literary theory has often found an affinity more with feminist theory than with gay theory; that is, the emphasis has often been on questions of gender (male/female) rather than on questions of sexual orientation (homosexuality/bisexuality/heterosexuality/transgenderation)—but this generalization is, itself, open to debate.

Critics ask various questions:

- Do lesbians and gays read in ways that differ from the ways straight people read?
- Do they write in ways that differ from those of straight people? (For instance, Gregory Woods argues in *Lesbian and Gay Writing: An Anthology of Critical Essays* (ed. Mark Lilly, 1990), that "modern gay poets [. . .] use [. . .] paradox, as weapon and shield, against a world in which heterosexuality is taken for granted as being exclusively natural and healthy" [176].
- How have straight writers portrayed lesbians and gays, and how have lesbian and gay writers portrayed straight women and men?
- What strategies did lesbian and gay writers use to make their work acceptable to a general public in an age when lesbian and gay behaviour was unmentionable? And how are they writing today in the face of continuing homophobia?

Questions such as these have stimulated critical writing, especially about bisexual and lesbian and gay authors (for instance Shakespeare—and not only the sonnets which praise a beautiful male friend—Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Elizabeth Bishop, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, Timothy Findley, Tennessee Williams, Jovette Marchessault, Stan Persky), but they have also led to important writing on other subjects. Robert Wallace, for example, asks why certain plays are produced in Canada and others are not (*Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada*, 1990) and considers gay plays as part of his answer.

Examination of matters of gender can obviously help to illuminate literary works, but some critics write also as activists, reporting their findings not only to help us to understand and to enjoy the works of such writers as Bryden MacDonald, Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan, Brad Fraser, and Walt Whitman, but also to change society's view of sexuality. Thus, in *Disseminating Whitman* (1991), Michael Moon is impatient with earlier critical rhapsodies about Whitman's universalism. It used to be said that Whitman's celebration of the male body was a sexless celebration of brotherly love in a

democracy, but the gist of Moon's view is that we must neither whitewash Whitman's poems with such high-minded talk, nor reject them as indecent; rather, we must see exactly what Whitman is saying about a kind of experience that society had shut its eyes to, and we must take Whitman's view seriously.

Many of the critics who raise these questions are, of course, themselves gay or lesbian, but it should also be pointed out that today there are straight critics who study lesbian or gay authors and write about them insightfully. One assumption in much lesbian and gay critical writing is that although gender greatly influences the ways in which we read, reading is a skill that can be learned, and therefore straight people—aided by lesbian and gay critics—can learn to read lesbian and gay writers with pleasure and profit. This assumption of course also underlies much feminist criticism, which often assumes that men must stop ignoring books by women and must learn (with the help of feminist critics) how to read them, and, in fact, how to read—with newly opened eyes—the sexist writings of men of the past and present.

Many critics discuss the concept of sexual identity itself.[1] Drawing upon the work of Foucault and others, critics such as David Halperin (*One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*, 1990) and Judith Butler (*Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, 1993) explore how various categories of identity, such as "heterosexual" and "homosexual," represent ways of defining human beings that are distinct to particular cultures and historical periods. These critics, who are "social constructionists," argue that however a given society interprets sexuality will determine the particular categories within which individuals come to understand and to name their own desires. For such critics, the goal of a lesbian or gay criticism is not to define the specificity of a lesbian or gay literature or modes of interpretation, but to show how the ideology, the normative understanding, of a given culture makes it seem natural to think about sexuality in terms of such identities as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or straight.

Because such critics have challenged the authority of the opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and have read it as a historical construct rather than as a biological or psychological absolute, they have sometimes resisted the very terms "lesbian" and "gay." Many now name their perspective QUEER THEORY in an attempt to mark their resistance to the categories of identity they see our culture imposing upon us. A special issue of the journal *English Studies in Canada* 20 (1993) discusses the concept of QUEER THEORY and uses it to explore a range of texts; a special issue of *Modern Drama* 39 (1996) provides a number of useful articles using such theory to discuss Canadian drama. Deconstructionist or psychoanalytic thought often influences this mode of criticism.

[1] This paragraph and the next are adapted from three paragraphs originally written by Lee Edelman of Tufts University, which appear on pp. 137–38 of the first edition of this text. The Canadian citations have been added and the original text reduced.

Post-colonialism

Because of Canada's colonial history and the immigration of many new Canadians from other former colonies, many critics in Canada are interested in issues broadly grouped as POST-COLONIAL THEORY. The term embraces a complex of questions arising from the colonial process and extending from the effects of early contact to political, social, and literary reactions to independence. In *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (Routledge, 1995), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin warn against restricting the term only to "after-colonialism," or "after-independence," pointing out that all post-colonial societies are still subject to "overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination." [2]

Critics using this approach consider many questions:

- migration and the diaspora of Native peoples;
- slavery;
- resistance to imperial control;
- the metanarratives or "master discourses" of Europe (or other imperial powers);
- relationships among power, race, gender, and place;
- social and national constructions and questions of representation; and
- uses of language (and literature) as tools of imperialism and of resistance.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out that it is in the "fundamental experiences of speaking and writing" [2] that these interconnected issues come into being and express their power.

The most influential theorists include Edward Said, whose study *Orientalism* (1977) was one of the beginning points for post-colonial discourse, Gayatri Spivak, who extended post-colonial analysis to issues of feminism and race, and the Australian team of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, (mentioned above) whose *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) is a standard introduction to the field.[2] Homi K. Bhabha extended the discourse in the 1990s. His important books, *Nation and Narration* (1990) and *The Location of Culture* (1994) explore how "literature both enforces and subverts the relations of dominant and colonized cultures" (Filewod).

Bhabha raises the dynamic tension between the mimicry of imperial presence and opposition to this presence. For Bhabha, this inevitable duality creates a "transparency," a hybrid state in which the dominant power paradoxically confirms what it seeks to master. Edward Said theorizes the "contrapuntal" relationship between margin and centre, the interplay between dominance and opposition (*Culture and Imperialism*, 1993: 259). Abdul R. JanMohamed (in "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature, *Critical Inquiry*, 1985) and others

[2] Alan Filewod of Guelph University contributed an overview to the first edition of this text, on pp. 138–39. Where his comments reappear (often in summary form) in this expanded discussion, they are identified.

also point out the self-contradictions implicit in all colonial binaries (self–other; civilized–Native, and the like), urging readers to recognize both polarities simultaneously as they actively read and, as a result, calling for a resistance reading. (You will recall similar calls by feminist critics, by Marxist critics, and by gay and lesbian critics.) By recognizing the crucial role of writing in the formation of identity, all these critics understand that writing can also be a tool of social reformation. These complex notions open the debate to larger issues of power relations of many kinds, of nation states, and of performance.

Some critics, however, feel that such theories reduce the political passion of earlier "national liberation" movements. (A similar argument is heard in feminist, gay and lesbian criticisms where some believe that intellectual theory sidelines the fight for political rights.) Others counter, saying that even these notions of liberation and entry to the "mainstream" depend upon definitions grounded in colonial language and values. This is a difficult, but important, debate in many poststructural criticisms: On the one hand, most thinkers today agree that identity and our sense of what is "real" is constructed within historical, social, and gender contexts, but—on the other hand—to detach "reality" from the material facts of its production would be to efface cultural difference. (You may wish to read more about this debate, or it may be sufficient to learn that it is a major discussion among thinkers today. At any rate, post-colonialism, like other critical lenses, alerts you to the need to read very carefully and to seek out the very serious implications in what is presented as mere fiction.)

In Canada, post-colonial speculation invites us to consider the concepts of "nation" and "national identity," terms that have been discussed by Canadians since Confederation and are part of the narrative of federation. As Alan Filewod explains, within this discourse, the concept of "identity" itself is exposed as a theoretical proposition shaped by historical experience, rather than an essential, "natural" condition of nationhood. In the preoccupation with national distinctiveness, and in the literary strategies developed to articulate the complexities of settlement and the displacement of aboriginal cultures, Canadian writing bears many similarities to that of the other "settler colonies" of the former British Empire. Post-colonialism enables critics to understand Canadian history and culture as part of a larger historical process, and to challenge the dominant focus on British and American literatures as the product of imperial experience.

The appearance of writing in English by Canadians from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds further urges a rethinking of the definition of "national identity." The links among many English-speaking peoples arise within language not only because people share common, or similar, lexicons, but because a shared experience as colonials has formed that language into an imitation of, and a variance from, British English ("the Queen's English").

The idea of the "universal" has marginalized many people (whose own stories now insist to be heard); post-colonial theory, by exposing the "universal" as an imperial construct, opens the way for many to express themselves in hybrid or oppositional texts. It is not, however, a simple evolution. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin conclude, "All are agreed, in some sense, that

the main problem is how to effect agency for the post-colonial subject. But the contentious issue of how this is to be attained remains unresolved" (9).

A Final Word

This chapter began by making the obvious point that all readers, whether or not they consciously adopt a particular approach to literature, necessarily read through particular lenses. More precisely, a reader begins with a frame of interpretation—historical, psychological, sexual, or whatever—and from within the frame a reader selects one of the several competing methodologies. Sometimes the point is made that readers decode a text by applying a grid to it; the grid enables them to see certain things clearly. Of course, such a grid or lens—an angle of vision or interpretative frame and a methodology—may also prevent a reader from seeing certain other things. We must not deceive ourselves by thinking that our keen tools enable us to see the whole. Each approach may illuminate aspects neglected by others. Used carefully, these filters may help you achieve the kind of satisfying reading which Richard Rorty says can occur from an "encounter" with a work of art "which has made a difference to the critic's conception of who she is, what she is good for, what she wants to do with herself [. . .]" (in Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, 1992: 107).

🕮 Suggestions For Further Reading

Because a massive list of titles may prove discouraging rather than helpful, it seems advisable here to give a short list of basic titles. (Titles already mentioned in this chapter—which are good places to begin—are not repeated in the following list.)

A collection of essays that re-evaluate the notion of a canon in Canadian literature may be found in *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value*, ed. David Lecker (1991). A good sampling of contemporary criticism can be found in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (1989), and *The Norton Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, et al. (2001). A good handbook with short entries for these terms (and many other literary terms) is Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, 2nd. ed. (1994).

For a readable introduction to various approaches, written for students who are beginning the study of literary theory, see Steven Lynn, *Texts and Contexts*, 3rd ed. (2000); also, Chapter 6 of John Peck and Martin Coyle, *Literary Terms and Criticism* (1993), which offers a useful British perspective. For a more advanced survey, that is, a work that assumes some familiarity with the material, see a short book by K. M. Newton, *Interpreting the Text: A Critical Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Literary Interpretation* (1990). For a collection of essays on Shakespeare written from a number of critical points of view see Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, eds., *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (1985); John Drakakis, ed., *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1992); or *Hamlet*, ed., Susanne L. Wofford, (1994)—which collects a group

of essays on the play, each from a different perspective; such a collection is an excellent way to compare approaches. Brian Vickers, *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels* (1993) offers stringent appraisal of such theoretical readings of Shakespeare.

Discussions (usually two or three pages long) of each approach, with fairly extensive bibliographic suggestions, are given in the appropriate articles in the four encyclopedic works by Harris, Makaryk, Groden, and Kreiswirth, and by Preminger and Brogan, listed at the end of Chapter 5, though only Groden and Kreiswirth (*Johns Hopkins Guide*) discuss lesbian and gay criticism. For essays discussing feminist, gender, Marxist, psychoanalytic, deconstructive, and New Historicist criticisms—as well as other topics not covered in this chapter, such as cultural criticism—see Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, eds., *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (1992).

Formalist Criticism (New Criticism)

Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947), especially Chapters 1 and 11 ("The Language of Paradox" and "The Heresy of Paraphrase"); W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (1954), especially "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy"; Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* (1956); and, for an accurate overview of this kind of criticism, Chapters 9–12 in volume 6 of René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950.*

Deconstruction

Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, rev. ed. (1991); Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction and Survey* (1983); Christopher Norris, ed., *What Is Deconstruction?* (1988); Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory* (1989); and *Deconstruction: A Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan (2001). A good introduction to Derrida in comic book format is Jim Powell, et al. *Derrida for Beginners* in the Writers and Readers Documentary Comic Book series. (This series provides good, approachable introductions to many critics and thinkers, including some we mention: Freud, Lacan, Foucault, and Marx.)

Reader-Response Criticism

Consider Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978); Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1993); Susan Sulleiman and Inge Crossman, eds., *The Reader in the Text* (1980); Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism* (1980); Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1973, 1989); Steven Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (1982); and Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (1990). For genre implications: Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, eds. *Genre and the New Rhetoric* (1994).

Archetypal Criticism

See G. Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome* (1941); Richard Chase, *Quest for Myth* (1949); Murray Krieger, ed., *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism* (1966); Robert D. Denham, *Northrop Frye and Critical Method* (1978); Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (1980); "Archetypal Patterns," in Norman Friedman, *Form and Meaning in Fiction* (1975).

Marxist Criticism

Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (1977); Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (1979); Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (1981); Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism*, new ed. (1992); Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (1993). Ric Knowles, *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning: Contemporary Canadian Dramaturgies* (1999) is an excellent application of a generally Marxist perspective to Canadian drama and performance.

Historical Criticism

For a brief survey of some historical criticism of the first half of this century, see René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950*, Vol. 6, Chap. 4 ("Academic Criticism"). E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943) and Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944), both of which related Elizabethan literature to the beliefs of the age, are good examples of the historical approach. (Note that Tillyard is today criticized for taking too neat a view of his period.)

New Historicism

N. H. New, *Among Worlds* (1975); Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, (1980)—especially the first chapter; Deiter Riemenschneider, ed., *The History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature* (1983); Brook Thomas, *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (1991), and Catherine Gallagher, *Practicing New Historicism* (2000).

Biographical Criticism

Estelle C. Jellinek, ed., *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980); James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (1981); and *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. There are many excellent biographies of writers: remember that you can enter an author's name as subject (not author) in a search engine or card catalogue and titles of books on the author, including biographies, will emerge.

Psychological (or Psychoanalytic) Criticism

Edith Kurzeil, and William Philips, eds., *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (1983); Maurice Charney and Joseph Reppen, eds., *Psychoanalytic Approaches to Literature and Film* (1987); Madelon Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (1990); Frederick Crews, *Out of My System* (1975); Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992).

Feminist Criticism

A good first source: *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Beth Kowaleski-Wallace (1997). For specific studies, see Gayle Greene and Coppèlia Kahn, eds., *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (1985), including an essay by Bonnie Zimmerman on lesbian criticism; Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, eds., *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (1989); Toril Moi, ed., *French Feminist Thought* (1987); Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweikart, eds., *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts* (1986); Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985); Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (1993); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979); Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980); Elaine Showalter, ed., *Speaking of Gender* (1989); Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire* (1993).

Lesbian and Gay Criticism

General introductions: *The Gay & Lesbian Literary Companion*, ed. Sharon Malinowski and Christa Vrelin (1995); *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage: A Reader's Companion to the Writers and Their Works, from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Claude J. Summers (1995); and Henry Abelove et al., eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993). See also Summers, *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* (1990); *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997); Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (1998); Annamarie Jogose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996); Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics—Queer Readings* (1994); and *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (1997); Diana Fuss, ed., *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (1991); Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (1981); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990); Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (1991); Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993); Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (1993); Robert Vorlicky, *Act Like a Man* (1995); R. Jeffrey Ringer, ed., *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality* (1994); Sue-Ellen

Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster, eds., *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality* (1995).

Post-colonial Criticism

For an encyclopedic collection of essays, including Canadian scholars, see Diana Brydon, ed., *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies (5 vols. 2000). See also* Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (1988); Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994); Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen, eds., *Colonial Discovery: Post-colonial Theory* (1994); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993); Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Post-colonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (1995); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983); Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics* (1981); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1988). See also the entry for Deiter Riemenschneider under New Historicism, above.