AN INTRODUCTION
TO
LITERARY CRITICISM

COMPILED BY
English Dep.

FIRST YEAR
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
English Dep.

2022- 2023

What Is Literary Criticism?

literary criticism is a disciplined activity that attempts to study, analyze, interpret, and evaluate a work of art. By necessity, this discipline attempts to formulate aesthetic and methodological principles on the basis of which the critic can evaluate a text.

When we consider its function and its relationship to texts, literary criticism is not usually considered a discipline in and of itself, for it must be related to something else—that is, a work of art. Without the work of art, the activity of criticism cannot exist. And it is through this discerning activity that we can explore those questions that help define our humanity, evaluate our actions/ or simply increase our appreciation and enjoyment of both a literary work and our fellow human beings.

When analyzing a work of art, literary critics ask basic questions concerning the philosophical, psychological, functional, and descriptive nature of a text. Since the time of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, the answers to these questions have been seriously debated.

Traditionally, literary critics involve themselves in either theoretical or practical criticism. Theoretical criticism formulates theories, principles, and tenets regarding the nature and value of art. By citing general aesthetic and moral principles of art, theoretical criticism provides the necessary framework for practical criticism. Practical criticism (known also as applied criticism) then applies the theories and tenets of theoretical criticism to a particular work—Huckleberry Finn, for example. It is the practical critic who defines the standards of taste and explains, evaluates, or justifies a particular piece of literature. A further distinction is made between the practical critic who posits that there is one and only one theory or set of principles a critic may utilize when evaluating a literary work—the absolutist critic—and the relativistic critic, who employs various and even contradictory theories in critiquing a piece of literature. The basis, however, for either kind of critic, or for any form of criticism, is literary theory. Without theory, practical criticism could not exist.

What Is Literary Theory?

What we tend to forget during the actual reading process is that we have read other literary works. Our response to any text, then—or the principles of practical criticism we apply to it—is largely a conditioned or programmed one—that is, how we arrive at meaning in fiction is in part determined by our past experiences. Consciously or unconsciously, we have developed a mind-set or framework concerning our expectations when reading a novel, a short story, a poem, or any other type of literature. In addition, what we choose to value or uphold as good or bad, moral or immoral, or beautiful or ugly within a given text actually depends on this ever-evolving framework. To articulate this framework and piece together the various elements of our practical criticism into a coherent, unified body of knowledge is to formulate our literary theory.

Since anyone who responds to a text is already a practicing literary critic, every reader espouses some kind of literary theory. Each reader's theory, however, may be conscious or unconscious, complete or incomplete, informed or ill-informed, eclectic or unified. An incomplete, unconscious, and therefore unclear literary theory leads to illogical, unsound, and haphazard interpretations. On the other hand, a well-defined, logical, and clearly articulated theory enables readers to develop a method whereby they can establish principles that enable them to justify, order, and clarify their own appraisals of a text in a consistent manner.

A well-articulated literary theory assumes that an innocent reading of a text or a sheerly emotional or spontaneous reaction to a work cannot exist, for theory questions the assumptions, beliefs, and feelings of readers, asking why they respond to a text in a certain way. According to a consistent literary theory, a simple emotional or intuitive response to a text does not explain the underlying factors that caused such a reaction. What elicits that response, or how the reader makes meaning out of the text, is what matters.

How we as readers make meaning out of or from the text will depend upon the mental framework that each of us has developed concerning the nature of reality. This framework or worldview consists of "the assumptions or presuppositions that we all hold (either consciously or unconsciously) concerning the basic makeup of our world." We all struggle, for example, to find answers to

such questions as these: What is the basis of morality or ethics? What is the meaning of human history? Is there an overarching purpose for humanity's existence? What are beauty, truth, and goodness? Is there an ultimate reality? Interestingly, our answers to these and other questions do not remain static, for as we interact with other people, with our environment, and with our own personal philosophies, we continue to grapple with these issues, often changing our ideas. But it is our answers that largely determine our response to a literary text.

Upon such a conceptual framework rests literary theory. Whether that framework is well-reasoned, or simply a matter of habit and past teachings, readers respond to works of art via their worldview. From this philosophical core of beliefs spring their evaluations of the goodness, the worthiness, and the value of art itself. Using their worldviews either consciously or unconsciously as a yardstick by which to measure and value their experiences, readers will respond to individual works of literature, ordering and valuing each separate or collective experience in the work based on the system of beliefs housed in their worldviews.

During the act of reading, this process becomes evident, for when we are reading, we are constantly interacting with the text. According to Louise M. Rosenblatt's text The Reader, the Text, the Poem (1978), during the act or "event" of reading:

> a reader brings to the text his/her past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, the reader marshals his/her resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he/she sees as the poem. This becomes part of the ongoing stream of the reader's life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to him/her as a human being.

Accordingly, Rosenblatt declares that the relationship between the reader and the text is not linear, but transactional; that is, it is a process or event that takes place at a particular time and place in which the text and the reader condition each other. The reader and the text transact or interact, creating meaning, for meaning does not exist either solely within the reader's mind or solely within the text, Rosenblatt maintains, but in the interaction between them. To arrive at an

interpretation of a text, readers bring their own "temperament and fund of past transactions to the text and live through a process of handling new situations, new attitudes, new personalities, [and] new conflicts in value. They can reject, revise, or assimilate into the resource with which they engage their world." Through this transactional experience, readers consciously and unconsciously amend their worldview.

Since no literary theory can account for all the various factors included in everyone's conceptual framework, and since we, as readers, all have different literary experiences, there can exist no metatheory—no one overarching literary theory that encompasses all possible interpretations of a text suggested by its readers. There can exist, then, no one correct literary theory, for in and of itself, each literary theory asks valid questions to and about the text, and no one theory is capable of exhausting all legitimate questions to be asked about any text.

The kinds of valid questions asked by the various literary theories often differ widely. Espousing separate critical orientations, each theory focuses primarily on one element of the interpretative process, although in practice different theories may utilize several areas of concern in interpreting a text. For example, one theory stresses the work. itself, believing that the text alone contains all the necessary information to arrive at an interpretation. This theory isolates the text from its historical and/or sociological setting and concentrates on the various literary forms found in the text, such as figures of speech, word choice, and style. Another theory attempts to place a text in its historical, political, sociological, religions, and economic setting. By placing the text in historical perspective, this theory asserts that its adherents can arrive at an interpretation that both the text's author and its original audience would support. Still another theory directs its chief concern toward the text's audience. It asks how the readers' emotions and personal backgrounds affect a text's interpretation. Whether the primary focus of concern is psychological, linguistic, mythical, historical, or any other critical orientation, each literary theory establishes its own theoretical basis and then proceeds to develop its own methodology whereby readers can apply this theory to an actual text.

Although each reader's theory and methodology for arriving at a text's interpretation will differ, sooner or later groups of readers and critics declare

allegiance to a similar core of beliefs and band together, thereby "founding" different schools of criticism. For example, those critics who believe that social and historical concerns must be highlighted in a text are known as Marxist critics, whereas reader-response critics concentrate on the reader's personal reactions to the text. Since new points of view concerning literary works are continually evolving, new schools of criticism and therefore new literary theories often develop. The most recent school to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, New Historicism, declares that a text must be analyzed through historical research that assumes that history and fiction are inseparable. The members of this school, known as New Historicists, hope to shift the boundaries between history and literature and thereby produce criticism that accurately reflects what they believe to be the proper relationship between the text and its historical context.

Since the various schools of criticism (and the theories on which they are based) ask different questions about the same work of literature, these theoretical schools provide an array of seemingly endless options from which readers can choose to broaden their understanding not only of the text but also of their society, their culture, and their own humanity. By embracing literary theory, we can thus learn not only about literature but also about tolerance for other people's beliefs. By rejecting or ignoring theory, we are in danger of canonizing ourselves as literary saints who possess divine knowledge and can therefore supply the one and only correct interpretation for a work of literature. To be against literary theory is also to be against "self-examination—against raising and exploring questions about how texts and selves and societies are formed and -maintained and for whose benefit." By embracing literary theory and literary criticism (its practical application), we can participate in the seemingly endless historical conversation and debate concerning the nature of humanity and its concerns as expressed in literature itself.

What Is Literature?

Since literary criticism presupposes that there exists a work of literature to be interpreted, we could assume that formulating a definition of what literature is would be simple. But not so. For centuries, writers, literary historians, and others have debated about but failed to agree on a definition for this term. Many assume that literature is simply anything that is written, thereby declaring a city

telephone book, a cookbook, and a road atlas to be literary works along with David Copperfield and Huckleberry Finn. Derived from the Latin littera, meaning "letter," the root meaning of literature refers primarily to the written word and seems to support this broad definition. Such a definition, however, eliminates the important oral traditions upon which much of our literature is based. For example, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, the English epic Beowulf, and many Native American legends could not, by this definition, be considered literature.

To solve this problem, others choose to define literature as an art, thereby leaving open the question of its being written or oral. This further narrows its meaning, equating literature with works of the imagination or creative writing. By this definition, written works such as a telephone book or a cookbook can no longer be considered literature, being replaced or superseded by poetry, drama, fiction, and other types of imaginative writing.

Although such a narrowing and an equating of the definition of literature to art seemingly simplifies what can and cannot be deemed a literary work, such is not the case. That the Banana Republic clothes catalogue is imaginative (and colorful) writing is unquestioned, but should it be considered a work of literature? Or should Madonna's "book" entitled Sex or the lyrics of the rap song "Cop Killer" be called a literary work? Is Madonna's text or the rap song an imaginative or a creative work? If so, can or should either of them be considered a work of literature? Defining and narrowing the definition of literature as being a work of art does not immediately provide consensus or a consistent rule concerning whether or not a work can or should be considered a work of literature.

Whether one accepts the broad or the narrow definition, many argue that a text must possess particular qualities before it can be considered literature. For example, the artist s creation or secondary world often mirrors the author's primary world, the world in which the creator lives and moves and breathes. Since reality or the primary world is highly structured, so must be the secondary world. To achieve this structure, the artist must create plot, character, tone, symbols, conflict, and a host of other elements or parts of the artistic story, with all of these literary elements working in a dynamic interrelationship to produce a literary work. It is the presence of these elements, some would argue, that determines whether or not a piece of writing is literature.

Still other critics add the test of time criterion to their list of the essential components of literature. If a work like Dante's The Divine Comedy withstands the passage of time and is still being read centuries after its creation, it is deemed valuable and worthy to be called literature. This criterion also denotes literature's functional or cultural value: if people value a written work, for whatever reason, they frequently decree it to be literature whether or not it contains the prescribed or so-called essential elements of a text.

What this work may contain is a peculiar aesthetic quality that distinguishes it as literature from other forms of writing. Aesthetics, that branch of philosophy that deals with the concept of the beautiful, strives to determine the criteria for beauty in a work of art. Theorists like Plato and Aristotle declare that the source of beauty is inherent within the art object itself, while other critics such as David Hume decree that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And some twentieth-century theorists argue that one's perception of beauty in a text rests in the dynamic relationship between the object and the perceiver at a given moment in time. Wherever the criteria for judging the beauty of a work of art finally reside, most critics agree that a work of literature does possess an appealing aesthetic quality.

While distinguishing literature from other forms of writing, this appealing aesthetic quality directly contributes to literature's chief purpose: the telling of a story. While it may simultaneously communicate facts, literature's primary aim is to tell a story. The subject of this story is particularly human, describing and detailing a variety of human experiences, not stating facts or bits and pieces of information. Literature does not, for example, define the word courage, but shows us a courageous character acting courageously. By so doing literature concretizes an array of human values, emotions, actions, and ideas in story form. And it is this concretization that allows us, the readers, to experience vicariously the lives of a host of characters. Through these characters we observe people in action, making decisions, struggling to maintain their humanity in often inhumane circumstances, and embodying for us a variety of values and human characteristics that we may embrace, discard, enjoy, or detest.

Is literature, then, simply a story that contains certain aesthetic and literary qualities that all somehow pleasingly culminate in a work of art? Put another way,

is a literary work ==ontological?==—that is, ==does it exist in and of itself or must it have an audience, a reader, before it becomes literature?== Although any answer is debatable, most would agree that an examination of a text's total artistic situation would help us make our decision. This total picture of the work involves such elements as the work itself (an examination of the fictionality or secondary world created within the story), the artist, the universe or world the work supposedly represents, and the audience or readers. Although readers and critics will emphasize one, two, or even three of these elements while deemphasizing the others, such a consideration of a text's artistic situation immediately broadens the definition of literature from the narrow concept that it is simply a written work that contains certain qualities to a definition that must include the dynamic interrelationship of the actual text and the readers. Perhaps, then, the literary competence of the readers themselves helps determine whether a work should be considered literature. If this is so, then a literary work may be more functional than ontological, its existence and therefore its value being determined by its readers and not by the work itself.

==Overall, the definition of literature really depends on the school of criticism which the reader and/or critic espouses.== For formalists, for example, the text and the text alone will contain certain qualities that make a particular piece of writing literature. But for reader-response critics, the interaction and psychological relationships between the text and the reader will help determine whether a document should be deemed literary.

==However one decides to define literature, unquestionably this art form provides many hours of pleasure for readers through the imaginative creation of secondary worlds via the vehicle of words.==

A Historical Survey of Literary Criticism

Questions concerning the value, the structure, and even the definition of literature undoubtedly arose in all cultures as people heard or read works of art. Such practical criticism probably began with the initial hearing or reading of the first literary works. It was the Greeks of the fifth century B.C., however, who first articulated and developed the philosophy of art and life that serves as the foundation for most theoretical and practical criticism. These fifth-century Athenians questioned the very act of reading and writing itself, while pondering the purpose of literature. In so doing, these early critics began a debate concerning the nature and function of literature that continues to the present day. What they inaugurated was the formal study of literary criticism.

From the fifth century B.C. to the present, various critics such as Plato, Dante, Wordsworth, and a host of others have developed principles of criticism that have had a major influence on the ongoing discussion of literary theory and criticism. By examining these critics' ideas, we can gain an understanding of and participate in this critical debate, while simultaneously acquiring an appreciation for and a working knowledge of both practical and theoretical criticism.

Plato (427-347 B.C.)

Alfred North Whitehead, a modern British philosopher, once quipped that "all of Western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato." Although others have indeed contributed to Western thought, it was Plato's ideas, expressed in his Republic, Ion, Crito, and other works, that laid the foundation for many, if not most, of the pivotal issues of both philosophy and literature: the concepts of truth, beauty, and goodness; the nature of reality; the structure of society; the nature and relations of being (ontology); questions concerning how we know what we know (epistemology); and ethics and morality. Since Plato's day, such ideas have been debated, debunked, or simply accepted. None, however, have been ignored.

Before Plato, only fragmentary comments concerning the nature or value of literature can be found. In the plays and writings of the comic dramatist Aristophanes, a contemporary of Plato, a few tidbits of practical criticism arise, but no clearly articulated literary theory. It is Plato who systematically begins the study of literary theory and criticism.

The core of Platonic thought resides in Plato's doctrine of essences, ideas, or forms. Ultimate reality, he states, is spiritual. This spiritual realm, "The One," is composed of "ideal" forms or absolutes that exist whether or not any mind posits their existence or reflects their attributes. It is these ideal forms that then give shape to our physical world, for our material world is nothing more than a shadowy replica of the absolute forms found in the spiritual realm. In the material world we can therefore recognize a chair as a chair because the ideal chair exists in this spiritual realm and preceded the existence of the material chair. Without the existence of the ideal chair, the physical chair, which is nothing more than a shadowy replica of the ideal chair, could not exist.

Such an emphasis on philosophical ideals earmarks the beginning of the first articulated literary theory and becomes the foundation for literary criticism. Before Plato and his Academy, Greek culture ordered its world through poetry and the poetic imagination; that is, by reading such works as the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Greeks saw good characters in action performing good deeds. From such stories, they formulated their theories of goodness and other similar standards. Such narratives became a framework or mode for discovering truth. With the advent of Plato and his Academy, however, philosophical inquiry and abstract thinking usurp the narrative as a method for discovering truth. Not by accident, then, Plato placed above his school door the words "Let no one enter here who is not a geometer." Like Plato himself, all his students had to value the art of reason and abstraction as opposed to the presentational mode for discovering truth. *

Such metaphysical reasoning not only usurps literature's role as an evaluating mode for discerning truth but actually condemns it. If ultimate reality rests in the spiritual realm, and the material world is a shadowy replica of the world of ideals, then according to Plato and his followers, poets (those who compose imaginative literature) are merely imitating an imitation when they write about any object in the material world. Accordingly, Plato declares that a poet's craft is "an inferior who marries an inferior and has inferior offspring"; now the poet is two steps or degrees removed from reality itself. These imitators of reality, says Plato, cannot be trusted.

While condemning poets for producing art that is nothing more than a copy of a copy, Plato also argues that poets produce their art irrationally, relying on untrustworthy intuition rather than reason for their inspiration. He writes, "For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and then the mind is no longer in him." Because such inspiration opposes reason and asserts that truth can be attained intuitively, Plato condemns all poets.

Since poets are both untrustworthy and damned, no longer can their works be the basis of the Greeks' morality or ethics. For Plato argues that in the poets' works, lies abound concerning the nature of ultimate reality. In the Iliad, for example, the gods lie and cheat and are one of the main causes of suffering among humans. Even the mortals in these works steal, complain, and hate each other. Such writings, contends Plato, set a bad example for Greek citizens and may even lead normally law-abiding people into paths of wickedness and immorality. In the Republic, Plato ultimately concludes that such people, the poets, must be banished.

In a later work, Plato seemingly recognizes society's need for poets and their craft to "celebrate the victors" of the state. Only those poets, however, "who are themselves good and also honorable in the state" can and will be tolerated. Plato thus decrees poetry's function and value in his society: to sing the praises of loyal Greeks. Poets must be supporters of the state or risk banishment from their homeland. Being mere imitators, these artisans and their craft must be rigorously censored.

By linking politics and literature in a seemingly moral and reasoned worldview, Plato and his Academy founded a complex theory of literary criticism that initiated the ongoing debate concerning the value, nature, and worth of the artist and of literature itself.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)

Whereas literary criticism's concern with morality began with Plato, its emphasis on the elements or characteristics of which a work is composed began with Aristotle. Plato's famous pupil. Rejecting some of his teacher's beliefs concerning

the nature of reality, Aristotle opts for a detailed investigation of the material world.

The son of a medical doctor from Thrace, Aristotle reveled in the physical world. After studying at the Academy and mastering the philosophy and the techniques of inquiry taught there, he founded the Lyceum, a school of scientific and philosophical thought and investigation. Applying his scientific methods of investigation to the study of literature, Aristotle answers Plato's accusations against "poetry" in a series of lectures known as the Poetics. Unlike exoteric works meant for general publication, the Poetics is an esoteric work, one meant for private circulation to those who attended the Lyceum. It therefore lacks the unity and coherence of Aristotle's other works, but it remains one of the most important critical influences on literary theory and criticism.

Aristotle's Poetics has become the cornerstone of Western literary criticism. By applying his analytic abilities to a definition of tragedy, Aristotle began in the Poetics a discussion of the components of a literary work that continues to the present day. Unfortunately, many critics and scholars mistakenly assume that the Poetics is a "how-to manual," defining and setting the standards for literature (particularly tragedy) for all time. Aristotle's purpose, however, was not to formulate a series of absolute rules for evaluating a tragedy, but to state the general principles of tragedy as he viewed them in his time while simultaneously responding to many of Plato's doctrines and arguments.

Even his choice of title, the Poetics, reveals Aristotle's purpose, for in Greek the word poetikes means "things that are made or crafted." Like a biologist, Aristotle will dissect tragedy to discover its component or crafted parts.

At the beginning of the Poetics, Aristotle notes that "epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most forms of flute and lyre playing all happen to be, in general, imitations." All seemingly differ in how and what they imitate, but nevertheless, Aristotle agrees with Plato that all the arts are imitations. In particular, the art of poetry exists because people are imitative creatures who enjoy such imitation. Plato contends that such pleasure can undermine the structure of society and all its values, but Aristotle disagrees. His disagreement is basically a metaphysical argument concerning the nature of imitation itself. While Plato posits that imitation is two steps removed from the truth or realm of the

ideal (the poet imitating an object that is itself an imitation of an ideal form), Aristotle contends that poetry is more universal, more general than things as they are. For "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may. happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity." It is the historian, not the poet, who writes of what has already happened. The poet's task, declares Aristotle, is to write of what could happen. "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal history the particular." In arguing that poets present things not as they are but as they should be, Aristotle rebuffs Plato's concept that the poet is merely imitating an imitation, for Aristotle's poet, with his emphasis on the universal, actually attains nearer to the ideal than does Plato's.

But not all imitations by poets are the same, for "writers of greater dignity imitated the noble actions of noble heroes; the less dignified sort of writers imitated the actions of inferior men." For Aristotle, "comedy is an imitation of base men ... characterized not by every kind of vice but specifically by 'the ridiculous/ some error or ugliness that is painless and has no harmful effects." It is to tragedy written by poets imitating noble actions and heroes that Aristotle turns his attention.

Aristotle's definition of tragedy has perplexed and frustrated many a reader:

Tragedy is, then, an imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude; it employs language that has been artistically enhanced by each of the kinds of linguistic adornment, applied separately in the various parts of the play; it is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents.

When put in context with other ideas in the Poetics, such a complex definition highlights Aristotle's chief contributions to literary criticism:

1. Tragedy, or a work of art, is an imitation of nature that reflects a higher form of art exhibiting noble characters and noble deeds, the act of imitation itself giving us pleasure.

2. Art possesses form; that is, tragedy, unlike life, has a beginning, a middle, and an end, with each of the parts being related to every other part. A tragedy, then, is an organic whole with all its various parts interrelated.

3. In tragedy, concern for form must be applied to the characters as well as the structure of the play, for the tragic hero must be "a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous." In addition, all tragic heroes must have a tragic flaw or hamartia that leads to their downfall in such a way as not to offend the audience's sense of justice.

4. The tragedy must have an emotional effect on its audience and "through pity and fear" effect a catharsis—that is, by the play's end, the audience's emotions should be purged, purified, or clarified (what Aristotle really meant by catharsis is debatable).

5. The universal, not the particular, should be stressed, for unlike history, which deals with what happens, poetry (or tragedy) deals with what could happen and is therefore closer to perfection or truth.

6. The poet must give close attention to diction or language itself, be it in verse, prose, or song, but ultimately it is the thoughts expressed through language that are of the utmost concern.

Interestingly, nowhere in the Poetics does Aristotle address the didactic value of poetry or literature. Unlike Plato, whose chief concern is the subject matter of poetry and its effects on the reader, Aristotle emphasizes literary form or structure, examining the component parts of a tragedy and how these parts must work together to produce a unified whole.

From the writings of these two philosopher-artists, Plato and Aristotle, issue the concerns, questions, and debates that have spearheaded the development of most literary schools of criticism. By addressing different aspects of these fifth-century Greeks' ideas and concepts, a variety of literary critics from the Middle Ages to the present have formulated theories of literary criticism that force us to ask different but equally legitimate questions of a text. But the shadows of Plato and Aristotle loom over much of what these later theorists espouse.

Horace (65-8 B.C.)

With the passing of the glory that was Greece and its philosopher-artists comes the grandeur of Rome and its chief stylist, Quintus Horatius Flaccus or simply Horace. A friend of Emperor Augustus and of many members of the Roman aristocracy, Horace enjoyed both the wealth and the influence of these associates. In a letter to the sons of one of his friends and patrons, Maecenas, Horace articulated what became the official canon of literary taste during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and through much of the neoclassic period. By reading this letter and his Ars Poetica or The Art of Poetry, any Roman aristocrat, any medieval knight, even Alexander Pope himself could learn the standards of good or proper literature.

Although Horace was probably acquainted with Aristotle's works, his concerns are quite different. Whereas both Plato and Aristotle decree that poets must, and do, imitate nature. Horas declares that poets must imitate other poets, particularly those of the past. Less concerned with metaphysics than his predecessors, Horace establishes the practical dos and don'ts for a writer. To be considered a good writer, he maintains, one should write about traditional subjects in novel ways. In addition, the poet should avoid all extremes in subject matter, word choice, vocabulary, and style. Gaining mastery in these areas can be achieved by reading and following the examples of the classical Greek and Roman authors. For example, since authors of antiquity began their epics in the middle of things, all epics must begin in medias res. Above all, writers should avoid appearing ridiculous and must therefore aim their sights low, not attempting to be a new Virgil or a new Homer.

Literature's ultimate aim, declares Horace, is to be dulce et utile, or ^sweet and useful; the best writings, he argues, both teach and delight. To achieve this goal, poets must understand their audience: the learned reader may wish to be instructed, while others may simply read to be amused. The poet's task is to combine both usefulness and delight in the same literary work.

Often oversimplified and misunderstood, Horace opts to give the would-be writer practical guidelines for the author's craft while leaving unchallenged many of the philosophical concerns of Plato and Aristotle. For Horace, a poet's greatest reward is the adulation of the public.

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586)

The paucity of literary criticism and theory during the Middle Ages is more than made up for by the abundance of critical activity during the Renaissance. One critic of this period far excels all others—Sir Philip Sidney.

As the representative scholar, writer, and gentleman of Renaissance England, Sidney is usually considered the first great English critic-poet. His work An Apology for Poetry (sometimes called Defence of Poesy) is the "epitome of the literary criticism of the Italian Renaissance" and the first influential piece of literary criticism in English history. With Sidney begins the English tradition and history of literary criticism.

In his critical theory as evidenced in An Apology for Poetry, Sidney is eclectic, borrowing and frequently amending the theories of Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and a few of his contemporaries among Italian critics. He begins his criticism by quoting from Aristotle; he writes, "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word mimesis, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth"; but eight words later he adds a Horatian note, declaring poesy's chief end to be "to teach and delight." Like Aristotle, Sidney values poetry over history, law, and philosophy; but he takes Aristotle's idea one step further by declaring that poetry, above all the other arts and sciences, embodies truth.

Unlike his classical forefathers, Sidney best personifies the Renaissance period when he dictates his literary precepts. After ranking the different literary genres and declaring all to be instructive, he decrees poetry to excel all. Other genres he mocks (tragicomedy, for example) and adds more dictates to Aristotelian tragedy by insisting on unity of action, time, and place.

Throughout An Apology for Poetry, Sidney stalwartly defends poetry against those who would view it as a mindless or even immoral activity. At the essay's end, a passionate and somewhat platonically inspired poet places a curse on all those who do not love poetry. Echoes of such emotionality reverberate throughout the centuries in English literature, especially in British romantic writings.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

By the close of the eighteenth century, the world had witnessed several major political rebellions—among them the American and French revolutions—along with exceptional social upheavals and prominent changes in philosophical thought. During this age of rebellion, a paradigmatic shift occurred in the way people viewed the world. Whereas the eighteenth century had valued order and reason, the emerging nineteenth-century worldview emphasized intuition as a proper guide to truth. The eighteenth- century mind likened the world to a great machine with all its parts operating harmoniously, but to the nineteenth-century perception the world was a living organism that was always growing and eternally becoming. Whereas the cities housed the centers of art and literature and set the standards of good taste for the rationalistic mind of the eighteenth century, the emerging nineteenth-century citizen saw rural settings the place where people could learn about and discover their inner selves. And, devaluing the empirical and rationalistic methodologies of the previous century, the nineteenth-century thinker believed that truth could be attained by tapping into the core of our humanity or our transcendental natures.

Such radical changes found their spokesperson in William Wordsworth. Bom in Cockermouth, Cumberlandshire, and raised in the Lake district of England, Wordsworth completed his formal education at St. John's College, Cambridge, in 1791. After completing his grand tour of the Continent, he published Descriptive Sketches and then met one of his literary admirers and soon-to-be friends and coauthors, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge published Lyrical Ballads, a collection of poems that heralded the beginning of British romanticism. In the ensuing 15-year period, Wordsworth wrote most of his best poetry, including Poems in Two Volumes, The Excursion, Miscellaneous Poems, and The Prelude. But it is Lyrical Ballads that ushers in the Romantic Age in English literature.

In addition to reshaping the focus of poetry' subject and language Wordsworth redefines poetry itself: "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Unlike Sidney, Dante, and Pope, who decree that poetry should be restrained, controlled, and reasoned, Wordsworth now

highlights poetry's emotional quality. imagination not reason or disciplined thought, becomes its core.

After altering poetry's subject matter, language, and definition, Wordsworth than redefines the role of the poet. The poet is no longer the preserver of civilized values or proper taste, but "he is a man speaking to men: a manT.. endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul than are supposed to be common among mankind." And this poet "has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement." Such a poet need no longer follow a prescribed set of rules. For this artist may freely express his or her own individualism, valuing and writing about those feelings which are peculiarly the artist's.

Since Wordsworth defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings ... [taking] its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility "his new kind of poet crafts a poem by internalizing a scene or happening and "recollects" that occasion with its accompanying emotions at a later time when the artist can shape that remembrance into words. Poetry, then, is unlike biology or one of the other sciences, for it deals not with something that can be dissected or broken down into its constituent parts, but primarily with the imagination and feelings. Intuition, not reason, reign.

But what of the reader? What part does the audience play in such a process? Toward the end of the "Preface," Wordsworth writes, "I have one request to make of my reader, which is, that in judging these poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others." Wordsworth apparently hopes that his readers' responses and opinions of his poems will not depend on those critics who would freely dispense their evaluations. Wordsworth wants his readers to rely on their own feelings and their own imaginations as they grapple with the same emotions the poet felt when he first saw and then later "recollected in tranquility" the subject or circumstances of the poem itself. Through poetry, declares Wordsworth, the poet and the reader share such emotions.

This subjective experience of sharing emotions leads Wordsworth away from the preceding centuries' mimetic and rhetorical theories of criticism and toward a new development in literary theory: the expressive school-those critics who emphasize the individuality of the artist and the reader's privilege to share in this individuality. By expressing such individuality and valuing the emotions and the imagination as legitimate concerns in poetry, Wordsworth lays the foundation for English romanticism and broadens the scope of literary criticism and theory for both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Modern Literary Criticism

Matthew Arnold's death in 1888 (and to a lesser degree Henry James's death in 1916) marks a transitional period in literary criticism. Like Dry- den, Pope, and Wordsworth before him, Arnold was the recognized authority and leading literary critic of his day, and it is his theories and criticism that embody the major ideas of his era. The passing of Arnold ends the predominance of any one person or set of ideas representing a broad time period or literary movement. After Arnold, literary theory and criticism become splintered and more diversified with no one theory or idea dominating for any one great period of time. At the end of the nineteenth century, most critics emphasized either a biographical or a historical approach to the text. Utilizing Taine's historical interests in a text and Henry James's newly articulated theory of the novel, many critics investigated a text as if it were the embodiment of its author or a historical artifact. No single, universally recognized voice, however, dominates literary theory in the years that follow Arnold or James. Instead, many distinctive literary voices give rise to a host of differing and exciting ways to examine a text.

What follows in the twentieth century is a variety of "schools of criticism," with each school asking legitimate, relevant but different questions concerning a text. Most of these schools abandon the holistic approach to literary study, which investigates, analyzes, and interprets all elements of the artistic situation, in favor of concentrating on one or more specific aspects. For example, modernism (and in particular New Criticism, the first critical movement of the twentieth century) wishes to break from the past and seemingly disavow the cultural influences on a work of literature. The text, these critics declare, will interpret the text. On the other hand, New Historicism, the newest school of thought to appear, argues that

most critics' historical consciousness must be reawakened, for in reality the fictional text and its historical and cultural milieu are amazingly similar. For these critics, a reader can never fully discern the truth about either a historical or a literary text, for truth itself is perceived differently from one era to another. The text-only criticism of the early twentieth century therefore appears biased and incomplete to these New Historicists.

New Criticism

Introduction

Dominating American literary criticism from the early 1930s to the 1960s, New Criticism can no longer be considered new. Its theoretical ideas, its terminology, and its critical methods are, more frequently than not, disparaged by present-day critics who themselves are introducing new ideas concerning literary theory. Despite its current unpopularity among critics, New Criticism dominated literary theory and practice throughout much of the twentieth century and stands as one of the most important English- speaking contributions to literary critical analysis.

The name New Criticism came into popular use to describe this approach to understanding literature with the 1941 publication of John Crowe Ransom's The New Criticism, which contained Ransom's personal analysis of several of his contemporaries among theorists and critics. Ransom himself was a Southern poet, a critic, and one of the leading advocates of this evolving movement. In The New Criticism he calls for an ontological critic, one who will recognize that a poem (used in New Criticism as a synonym for any literary work) is a concrete entity like Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" or the score of Handel's Messiah or even any chemical element such as iron or gold. Like these concrete objects, a poem can be analyzed to discover its true or correct meaning independent of its author s intention or emotional state, or the values and beliefs of either its author or its reader. Since this belief concerning the nature of a poem rests at the center of this movement's critical ideas, it is not surprising that the title of Ransom's book quickly became the official calling card for this approach to literary analysis.

Called modernism, formalism, aesthetic criticism, textual criticism, or ontological criticism throughout its long and successful history, New Criticism does not represent a coherent body of critical theory and methodology espoused by all its followers. At best, New Criticism and its adherents (called New Critics) are an eclectic group, challenging, borrowing, and changing terminology, theory, and practices from one another while simultaneously asserting a common core of basic ideas. Their ultimate unity stems from their opposition to the methods of literary analysis prevailing in academia in the first part of the twentieth century.

Historical Development

At the beginning of the twentieth century (often dubbed the start of the Modernist period, or Modernism), historical and biographical research dominated literary scholarship. Criticism's function, many believed, was to discover the historical context of the text and to ascertain how the authors' lives influenced their writings. Such extrinsic analysis (examining elements outside the text to uncover the text's meaning) became the norm in the English departments of many American universities and colleges. Other forms of criticism and interpretation were often intermingled with this emphasis on history and biography. Some critics, for example, believed we should appreciate the text for its beauty. For these impressionistic critics, how we feel and what we personally see in a work of art is what really matters. Others were more philosophical, arguing a naturalistic view of life that emphasizes the importance of scientific thought in literary analysis. For advocates of naturalism, human beings are simply animals who are caught in a world that operates on definable scientific principles and who respond somewhat instinctively to their environment and to their internal drives. Still other critics, the New Humanists, valued the moral qualities of art. Declaring that human experience is basically ethical, these critics demand that literary analysis be based on the moral values exhibited in a text. Finally, remnants of nineteenth-century romanticism asserted themselves. For the romantic scholar, literary study concerns itself with artists' feelings and attitudes exhibited in their work. Known as the expressive school, this romantic view values the individual artist's experiences as evidenced in the text.

Along with impressionism, the New Humanism, and naturalism, this romantic view of life and art was rejected by the New Critics. In declaring the objective existence of the poem, the New Critics assert that only the poem itself can be objectively evaluated not the feelings, attitudes, values, and beliefs of either the author or the reader. Because they concern themselves primarily with an examination of the work itself and not its historical context or biographical elements, the New Critics belong to a broad classification of literary criticism called formalism. Being formalists, the New Critics espouse what many call "the text and text alone" approach to literary analysis.

Such an approach to textual criticism automatically leads to many divergent views concerning the elements that constitute what the New Critics call the poem. Since many of the practitioners of this formalistic criticism disagree with one another concerning the various elements that make up the poem and hold differing approaches to textual analysis, it is difficult to cite a definitive list of critics who consider themselves New Critics. We can, however, group together those critics who hold to some of the same New Critical assumptions concerning poetic analysis. Among this group are John Crowe Ransom, Rene Wellek, W. K. Wimsatt, R. P. Black- mur, I. A. Richards, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks. Thanks to the publication of the 1938 college text Understanding Poetry by Brooks and Warren, New Criticism emerged in American universities as the leading form of textual analysis from the late 1930s until the early 1960s.

^ Although New Criticism emerged as a powerful force in the 1940s, its roots go back to the early 1900s. Two British critics and authors, T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, helped lay the foundation for this form of formalistic analysis. From Eliot, New Criticism borrows its insistence that criticism be directed toward the poem, not the poet. The poet, declares Eliot, does not infuse the poem with his or her personality and emotions, but uses language in such a way as to incorporate within the poem the impersonal feelings and emotions common to all humankind. Poetry is not, then, the freeing of the poet's emotions, but an escape from them. Since the poem is an impersonal formulation of common feelings and emotions, the poem unites the poet's impressions and ideas in some mystical or unseen way, producing a text that is not a mere reflection of the poet's personal feelings.

The New Critics also borrow Eliot's belief that the reader of poetry must be instructed concerning literary technique. A good reader, maintains Eliot, perceives the poem structurally, resulting in good criticism. Such a reader must necessarily be trained in reading good poetry (especially the poetry of the Elizabethans, John Donne, and other metaphysical poets), and be well acquainted with established poetic traditions. A poor reader, on the other hand, simply expresses his or her personal reactions and emotions concerning a text. Such a reader is untrained in literary technique and craftsmanship. Following Eliot's lead, the New Critics declare that there are both good and bad readers and good and bad criticism. A poor reader and poor criticism, for example, may argue that a poem can mean anything its reader or its author wishes it to mean. On the other hand, a good

critic and good criticism would assert that only through a detailed structural analysis of a poem can the correct interpretation arise.

Eliot also lends New Criticism some of its technical vocabulary. Thanks to Eliot, for example, the term objective correlative has become a staple in poetic jargon. According to Eliot, the only way of expressing emotion through art is by finding an objective correlative: a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events or reactions that can effectively serve to awaken in the reader the emotional response which the author desires without being a direct statement of that emotion. When the external facts are thus presented in the poem, they somehow come together and immediately evoke an emotion. The New Critics readily adopted and advanced such an impersonal theory concerning the arousing of emotions in poetry.

From Eliot's British contemporary, I. A. Richards, a psychologist and literary critic, New Criticism borrows a term that has become synonymous with its methods of analysis: practical criticism. In an experiment at Cambridge University, Richards distributed to his students copies of poems minus such information as the authors, dates, and oddities of spelling and punctuation, and asked them to record their responses. From this data he identified the difficulties that poetry presents to its readers: matters of interpretation, poetic techniques, and specific meanings. From this analysis Richards devised an intricate system for arriving at a poem's meaning, including a minute scrutiny of J-Hp It is this close scrutiny or "close reading" of a text that has become synonymous with New Criticism.

From Eliot, Richards, and other critics, then, New Criticism borrows, amends, and adds its own ideas and concerns. Although few of its advocates would agree upon many tenets, definitions, and techniques, there exists a core of assumptions that allows us to identify adherents of this critical approach to texts.

Assumptions

New Criticism begins by assuming that the study of imaginative literature is valuable; to study poetry or any literary work is to engage oneself in an aesthetic experience (the effects produced upon an individual when contemplating a work of art that can lead to truth. The truth discoverable through an aesthetic experience, however, is distinguishable from the truth that science provides us. Science speaks propositionally, telling us whether a statement is demonstrably

either true or false. Pure water, says science, freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, not 30 or 31. Poetic truth, on the, other hand, involves the use of the imagination and intuition, a form of mystical truth that according to the New Critics is discernible only in poetry. In the aesthetic experience alone we are cut off from mundane or practical concerns, from mere rhetorical, doctrinal or propositional statements. Through an examination of the poem itself we can ascertain truths that cannot be perceived through the language and logic of science. Science and poetry, then, provide different but equally valid sources of knowledge.

Like many other critical theories, New Criticism's theory begins by defining its object of concern, in this case a poem. New Critics assert that a poem has ontological status; that is, it possesses its own being and exists like any other object. In effect, a poem becomes an artifact, an objective, self-contained, autonomous entity with its own structure.

Having declared a poem an object in its own right, the New Critics then develop their objective theory of art. For them, the meaning of a poem must not be equated with its author's feelings or stated or implied intentions. To believe that a poem's meaning is nothing more than an expression of the private experiences or intentions of its author is to affirm what the New Critics call the intentional fallacy. Because they believe that the poem is an object, they claim that every poem must also be a public text that can be understood by applying the standards of public discourse, not simply the private experience, concerns, and vocabulary of its author.

That the poem is somehow related to its author cannot be denied. In his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot states the New Critical position concerning this relationship between the author and his or her work. The basis of Eliot's argument is an analogy. We all know, he says, that certain chemical reactions occur in the presence of a catalyst, an element that causes but is not affected by the reaction. For example, if we place hydrogen peroxide, a common household disinfectant, in a clear bottle and expose it to the sun's rays, we will no longer have hydrogen peroxide. Acting as a catalyst, the sun's rays will cause a chemical reaction to occur, breaking down the hydrogen peroxide into its various parts while the sun's rays remain unaffected.

Similarly, the poet's mind serves as a catalyst for the reaction that yields the poem. During the creative process, the poet's mind, serving as the catalyst, brings together the experiences of the author's personality (not the author's personality traits or attributes), into an external object and a new creation: the poem. It is not, then, the personality traits of the author that coalesce to form the poem, but the experiences of the author's personality. In apparently distinguishing between the personality and the mind of the poet, Eliot asserts that the created entity, the poem, is about the experiences of the author that are similar to all of our experiences. By structuring these experiences, the poem allows us to examine them objectively.

Dismissing the poet's stated or supposed intentions as a means of discovering the text's meaning, the New Critics give little credence to the biographical or contextual history of a poem. If the Intentional Fallacy is correct, then unearthing biographical data will not help us ascertain a poem's meaning. Likewise, trying to place a poem in its social or political context will tell us much social or political history concerning the time when the poem was written; while such information may indeed help in understanding the poem, its real meaning cannot reside in this extrinsic or out- side-the-text information.

Of particular importance to the New Critics are individual words etymology. Since the words of a poem sometimes change meaning from one time period to another, the critic often needs to be involved in historical research, discovering what individual words meant at the time the poem was written. The Oxford English Dictionary (a dictionary that cites a word's various historical meanings chronologically) then becomes one of the critic's best friends.

Placing little emphasis on the author, the social context, or a text's historical situation as a source for discovering a poem's meaning, the New Critics also assert that a readers' emotional response to the text is neither important nor equivalent to its interpretation. Such an error in judgment, called the Affective Fallacy, confuses what a poem is (its meaning) with what it does. If we derive our standard of criticism, say the New Critics, from the psychological effects of the poem, we are then left with impressionism or, worse yet, relativism, believing that a poem has innumerable valid interpretations.

Where, then, can we find the poem's meaning? According to the New Critics, it does not reside in the author, the historical or social context of the poem, or even in the reader. Since the poem itself is an artifact or objective entity, its meaning must reside within its own structure. Like all other objects, a poem and its structure can be scientifically analyzed, Accordingly, careful scrutiny reveals that a poem's structure operates according to a complex series of laws. By closely analyzing this structure, the New Critics believe that they have devised a methodology and a standard of excellence that we can apply to all poems to discover their correct meanings. It is the critic's job, they conclude, to ascertain the structure of the poem, to see how it operates to achieve its unity, and to discover how meaning evolves directly from the poem itself.

According to New Criticism, the poet is an organizer of the content of human experience. Structuring the poem around the often confusing and sometimes contradictory experiences of life, the poet crafts the poem in such a way that the text stirs its readers' emotions and causes readers to reflect upon the poem's contents. Being an artisan, the poet is most concerned with effectively developing the poem's structure, for the artist realizes that the meaning of a text emerges chiefly from its structure. The poet's chief concern, maintain the New Critics, is how meaning is achieved through the various and sometimes conflicting elements operating in the poem itself.

The chief characteristic of the poem and therefore its structure is coherence or interrelatedness. Perhaps borrowing their ideas from the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the New Critics posit the organic unity of a poem—that is, the concept that all parts of a poem are interrelated and interconnected, with each part reflecting and helping to support the poem's central idea. Such organic unity allows for the harmonization of conflicting ideas, feelings, and attitudes, and results in the poem's oneness.

Since the poem's chief characteristic is its oneness. New Critics believe that form and content are inseparable. In other words, form, or the technique used to craft the poem, is indivisible from the poem's content. Put another way, a poem's beauty (form) and its truth (content) cannot be separated. It is inconceivable, then, say the New Critics, to believe that a poem can be equated with paraphrased prose. Declaring such erroneous belief the Heresy of Paraphrase,

New Critics maintain that a poem is not simply. a statement that is either true or false, but a bundle of harmonized tensions and resolved stresses, more like a ballet or musical composition than a statement of prose. No simple paraphrase can equal the meaning of the poem, for the poem itself resists through its inner tensions any prose statement that attempts to encapsulate its meaning. Paraphrases may help readers in their initial understanding of the poem, but such prose statements must be considered working hypotheses that may or may not lead to a true understanding of the poem's meaning. In no way should paraphrased statements about a poem, insist the New Critics, be considered equivalent to the poem's structure.

Methodology

Believing in the thematic and structural unity of a poem, New Critics begin their search for meaning within the text's structure by finding the tensions and conflicts that are eventually resolved into a harmonious whole. Such a search leads them directly to the poem's word choice. Unlike scientific discourse, with its precise terminology, poetic diction often has multiple meanings and can immediately set up a series of tensions within the poem. Many words, for example, have both a denotation (dictionary meaning) and a connotation (implied meaning). A word's denotation may be in direct conflict with its connotative meaning determined by the context of the poem. In addition, it may be difficult to differentiate among the various denotations of a word. For example, if someone writes that "a fat head enjoys the fat of the land," the reader must note the various denotative and connotative differences in the word fat. At the start of poetic analysis, then, conflicts or tensions exist by the very nature of poetic diction. This tension New Critics call ambiguity. At the end of a dose reading of the text, however, all such ambiguities will and must be resolved

Even on a surface level of reading, a poem is thus a reconciliation of conflicts, of opposing meanings and tensions. Its form and content being indivisible, it is the critic's job to analyze the poetic diction to ascertain such tensions. Although various New Critics give a variety of names to the poetic elements that govern a poem's structure, all agree that the poem's meaning is derived from the oscillating tensions and conflicts that are brought to the surface through the poetic diction. Cleanth Brooks, for example, claims that the chief elements in a

poem are paradox and irony, two closely related terms that imply that a word or phrase is qualified or even undercut by its context. Other critics use the word tension to describe the opposition or conflicts operating within the text. For these critics, tension implies the conflicts between a word's denotation and its connotation, between a literal detail and a figurative one, and between an abstract and a concrete detail.

Since conflict, ambiguity, or tension controls the poem's structure, the meaning of the poem can be discovered only by analyzing contextually the poetic elements and diction. Because context governs meaning, meanings of individual words or phrases are therefore context-related and unique to the specific poem in which they occur. It is the job of the critic, then, is to unravel the various apparent conflicts and tensions within each poem and to show that ultimately the poem is an organic unity, that is, that all parts of a poem are interrelated and support the poem's chief paradox. This paradox can usually be expressed in one sentence that contains the main tension and the resolution of that tension. It is this key idea to which all other elements of the poem must relate. By searching out the text's use of irony, paradox, ambiguity, denotations, connotations, figures of speech, literal and figurative language, tone, theme, and meter, the critic can discover the poem's central paradox and therefore its interpretation by using only the text itself.

According to the principles of New Criticism, a good critic examines a poem's structure by scrutinizing its poetic elements, rooting out and showing its inner tensions, and demonstrating how the poem supports its overall meaning by reconciling these tensions into a unified whole. By implication, bad critics are those who insist upon imposing extrinsic evidence such as historical or biographical information upon a text to discover its meaning. These critics fail to realize that the text itself elicits its own meaning. They flounder in their analysis, often believing that a text can have multiple meanings.

Although New Critics may first approach the text through paraphrase (realizing, of course, that a paraphrase does not equal the poem's meaning), generally they begin their analysis by examining the language of the poem itself. Such analysis immediately highlights some of the poem's tensions, revealing ambiguities and paradoxes. For example, in the essay that follows at the end of this chapter, the

student (a New Critic) demonstrates the ambiguity that arises when Browning's duke uses the word last to refer to his duchess. Does last mean the duke's former wife? Were there any others before this last one? Will he also refer to the new duchess he is presently seeking as his last duchess sometime in the future? Answers to these questions, insist New Critics, must be found within the structure of the text itself by examining the poem's diction and other structural elements.

While investigating a poem's diction, New Critics will often simultaneously seek out any figurative element evidenced in the text, such as simile (the comparison of two unlike objects using like or as), metaphor (the direct comparison of two unlike objects in which the qualities of one are taken on by the other), personification (attributing human qualities to animals, ideas, or an inanimate object), and a host of other terms describing the use of figurative language in poetic diction. At first, an examination of the text's figurative language may lead to seemingly contradictory interpretations. Upon further analysis, however, a New Critic will show how these apparent contradictions all coalesce to support the poem's chief paradox and the text's organic unity. '

Having revealed through such an analysis the various tensions existing in the poem, New Critics may then turn their attention to the poem's rhyme scheme, its meter, and other technical aspects of prosody. Through this analysis the critic will show how the technical elements of the text aid in formulating the contextual meaning of the poem's language.

Finally, the New Critic may examine the text for tone (another word for the mood created by the text) or any imagery, paradox, or irony that seems to unite the entire poem, thereby giving it its organic unity and meaning.

This close reading of a text, claim the New Critics, allows alert readers to discover and understand the meaning of a poem. It also provides readers with a set of norms that will assist them in formulating their interpretation. Such an objective scrutiny of the text, they maintain, will aid readers in finding the that evidences the text's organic unity), rather than involving readers in an unguided and undisciplined search for the poem's meaning. By declaring a poem to have ontological the New Critics assert that the poem itself will reveal its own meaning.

In the sample essay that follows, note how the student uses the tenets of New Criticism to arrive at an interpretation of Robert Browning's poem "My Last

Duchess" (found at the back of this book). By analyzing the poem's poetic diction, the student uncovers ambiguities and tensions within the poem. Such tensions, however, are resolved by the end of the analysis by discovering the poem's organic unity and seeing how the various elements of the text support and enhance the poem's central paradox.

Reader-Response Criticism

Assumptions

Like most approaches to literary analysis, reader-response criticism does not provide us with a unified body of theory or a single methodological approach for textual analysis. What those who call themselves reader- response critics, reader-critics, or audience-oriented critics share is a concern for the reader. Believing that a literary work's interpretation is created when a reader and a text interact and/or transact, these critics assert that the proper study of textual analysis must consider both the reader and the text, not simply the text in isolation. For these critics, the reader + the text = meaning. Only in context with a reader actively involved in the reading process with the text, they decree, can meaning emerge.

Meaning, declare reader-response critics, is context-dependent and intricately associated with the reading process. Like literary theory, several theoretical models and their practical applications exist to explain the reading process, or how we make sense of printed material. Using these various models, reader-response critics have devised three approaches to the literacy experience. Each approach emphasizes different philosophies, assumptions, and methodologies to explain what these various critics believe happens when a reader interacts with printed material.

Although each model espouses a different approach to textual analysis, all share some of the same presuppositions and concerns and ask similar questions. All, for example, focus directly on the reading process. What happens, they ask, when a person picks up printed material and reads it? Put another way, their chief interest lies in what occurs when a text and a reader interact. During this interaction, reader-response critics investigate and theorize whether the reader, the text, or some combination. Finally determine the text's interpretation. Is it the reader who manipulates the text, they ponder, or does the text manipulate the reader to produce meaning? Does some word, phrase, or image trigger in the reader's mind a specific interpretation, or does the reader approach the text with a conscious or an unconscious collection of learned reading strategies that systematically impose an interpretation on the text?

Such questions then lead reader-response critics to a further narrowing and developing of terminology. They ask, for example, what is a text? Is it simply the words or symbols on a page? How, they ask, can we differentiate between what is actually in the text and what is in the mind of the reader? And who is this reader, anyway? Are there various kinds of readers? Is it possible that different texts presuppose different kinds of readers?

And what about a reader's response to a text? Are the responses equivalent to the text's meaning? Can one reader's response, they speculate, be more correct than some other reader's, or are all responses of equal validity? Although readers respond to the same text in a variety of ways, why is it, they ask, that oftentimes different readers individually arrive at the same conclusions or interpretations of the same text?

Reader-response critics also ask questions about another person, the author. What part, if any, does the author play in a work's interpretation? Can the author's attitudes toward the reader, they wonder, actually influence a work's meaning? And if a reader knows the author's clearly stated intentions for a text, joes this information have any part in creating the text's meaning, or should an author's intentions for a work simply be ignored?

The concerns, then, of reader-response critics can best be summarized in one question: What is the reading process? Overall, these critics concern themselves with the entire process of the literacy experience. Their approaches to this reading experience or event, however, are many.

Historical Background

Although reader-response criticism rose to prominence in literary analysis in the early 1970s and still influences much contemporary criticism, its historical roots can be traced to the 1920s and 1930s. Such precise dating, however, is artificial, for readers have obviously been responding to what they have read and experienced since the dawn of literature itself. Even the classical writers Plato and Aristotle were aware of and concerned about the reader's (or viewer's) reactions. Plato, for example, asserts that watching a play could so inflame the passions of the audience that the viewers would forget that they were rational beings and allow passion, not reason, to rule their actions. Similarly, in the Poetics Aristotle

voices concern about the effects a play will have on the audience's emotions. Will it arouse the spectators' pity or fear? Will these emotions purge the viewer? Will they cleanse a spectator of all emotions by the play's end? Such interest in audience response to the artistic creation dominates much literary criticism.

Underlying both Plato's and Aristotle's concern about audience response, and the concern of many critics who follow in their paths, is the assumption that the audience (or the reader) is passive. As if watching a play or reading a book were a spectator sport, readers sit passively, absorbing the contents of the artistic creation and allowing it to dominate their thoughts and actions. From this point of view, the reader brings little to the play or text. The text provides all that is needed to interpret itself.

From Plato's time until the being of the romantic movement in British literature at the beginning of the 1800s, such a passive view of the reader existed. Although many critics recognized that a text did indeed have an effect upon its readers, criticism concerned itself primarily with the text. With the advent of romanticism, emphasis shifted from the text to the author. The author now became the genius who could assimilate truths that were unacknowledged or unseen by the general populace. And as the nineteenth century progressed, concern for the author continued, with literary criticism stressing the importance of the author's life, times, and social context as chief aids in textual analysis.

But by the 1920s, emphasis in textual analysis once again shifted to the text. With the advent of the New Criticism, the text became autonomous— an objective entity that could be analyzed and dissected. If studied thoroughly, the New Critics believed, the text would reveal its own meaning. Extrinsic factors such as historical or social context mattered little. The text itself contains what we need to discover its meaning. We need only master the technical jargon and techniques to unlock its meaning.

While positing the autonomy of the text, the New Critics did acknowledge the effects a text could have on its readers. Studying the effects of a literary work, they decreed, was not the same as studying the text itself, however. This emphasis on the objective nature of the text once again created a passive reader who did not bring personal experiences, private emotions, and past literary experiences to bear upon textual analysis.

In the midst of New Criticism's rise to dominance in textual analysis, which would last for more than 30 years, one of its founding fathers, I. A. Richards. Became interested in the reading process itself. Distributing to classes copies of poems without their authors and titles and with various editorial changes that updated spelling and pronunciation, Richards asked his students to record their free responses to the texts. After collecting and analyzing these responses, Richards was amazed at the many contradictory responses to the same texts, and realized the part context plays in the interpretative process. He proposed that his students brought to the text many interests, philosophies, and contexts that were simply wrong. Being a New Critic, he wanted to direct them toward the "correct" assumptions and contexts. Nevertheless, he did recognize the contextual nature of reading poems; that is, the reader brings to the text a vast array of ideas amassed through life's experiences, including previous literary experiences, and applies such information to the text In so doing, the reader is no longer the passive receiver of knowledge but becomes an active participant in the creation of a text's meaning.

In the 1930s. Louise Rosenblatt further developed Richards' earlier assumptions concerning the contextual nature of the reading process. In her text Literature as Exploration, published in 1938, Rosenblatt asserts that the reader and the text must work together to produce meaning. Unlike the New Critics, she shifts the emphasis of textual analysis away from the text alone and views the reader and the text as partners in the interpretative process.

In the late 1930s, however, Rosenblatt's ideas seemed revolutionary, too abstract, and simply off the beaten critical path. Although New Criticism dominated literary practice for the next 30 years or so, Rosenblatt continued to develop her ideas, culminating her critical work with the publication of The Reader, the Text, the Poem in 1978. In this work, she clarifies her earlier ideas and presents what has become one of the main critical positions held by many theorists and practical critics today.

According to Rosenblatt, the reading process involves a reader and a text. The reader and the text interact or share a transactional experience: the text acts as a stimulus for eliciting various past experiences, thoughts, and ideas from the reader, those found both in real life and in past reading experiences.

Simultaneously, the text shapes the reader's experiences, selecting, limiting, and ordering those ideas that best conform to the text. Through this transactional experience, the reader and the text produce a new creation, a poem. For Rosenblatt and many other reader-response critics, a poem now becomes an event that takes place during the reading process or what Rosenblatt calls the aesthetic transaction. No longer synonymous with the word text, a poem is created each time a reader interacts with a text, be that interaction a first reading or any of countless rereadings of the same text.

For Rosenblatt, readers can and do read in one of two ways: efferently or aesthetically. When we read for information—for example, when we read the directions on how to heat a can of soup—we are engaging in efferent reading. During this process we are interested only in newly gained information, not in the actual words themselves. When we engage in aesthetic reading, we experience the text. We note its every word, its sounds, its patterns, and so on. In essence, wp live through the transactional experience of creating the poem.

When reading aesthetically, we involve ourselves in an elaborate encounter and give and take with the text. While the text may allow for many interpretations by eliciting and highlighting different past experiences of the reader, it simultaneously limits the valid meanings the poem can acquire. For Rosenblatt, a poem's meaning is not therefore a smorgasbord of endless interpretations, but a transactional experience in which several different yet probable meanings emerge and thereby create a variety of "poems."

What differentiates Rosenblatt's and all reader-response approaches from other critical approaches (especially formalism and/or New Criticism) is their diverting the emphasis away from the text as the sole determiner of meaning to the significance of the reader as an essential participant in the reading process and in the creation of meaning. Such a shift negates the formalists' assumption that the text is autonomous and can therefore be scientifically analyzed to discover its meaning. No longer, then, is the reader passive, merely applying a long list of learned poetic devices to a text in the hope of discovering its intricate patterns of paradox and irony, which, in turn, will lead to a supposed correct interpretation. For reader-response critics, the reader now becomes an active participant along

with the text in creating meaning. It is from the literacy experience (an event that occurs when reader and print interact), they believe, that meaning evolves.

Methodology

Most reader-response critics can be divided into three distinct groups. Although members within each group may differ slightly, each group espouses similar theoretical and methodological concerns. Student B's interpretation at the beginning of this chapter represents the focus of the first group. Like all reader-response critics, this group believes that the reader must be an active participant in the creation of meaning, but for these critics, the text has more control over the interpretative process than does the reader. Some of these critics lean toward New Critical theory, asserting that some interpretations are more valid than others. Others, like Student B at the beginning of this chapter, differentiate between a text's meaning and its significance. For them, the text's meaning can be synonymous with its author's intention, while its significance can change from one context or historical period to another.

But the majority of critics in this first group belong to the school known as Structural is my Some scholars would argue (and perhaps successfully so) that the structuralists should not be placed in this group, for ultimately meaning for them does not reside in the text. But since these critics begin with the text and because the next chapter will be devoted solely to their theories and practices, as a matter of convenience we will place them midway between text-oriented critics and those who claim that meaning basically resides in the reader's mind.

Basing their ideas on the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, these critics often approach textual analysis as if it were a science. Their proponents—Roland Barthes, Gerard Genette, Roman Jakobson, Claude Levi-Strauss, Gerald Prince, and Jonathan Culler in his early works—look for specific codes within the text that allow meaning to occur. These codes or signs embedded in the text are part of a larger system that allows meaning to occur in all facets of society, including literature. For example, when we are driving a car and we see a red light hanging above an intersection, we have learned that we must stop our car. And if we hear a fire engine or an ambulance siren, we have learned that we must drive our car to the side of the road. Both the red light and

the sirens are signs or codes in our society that provide us with ways of interpreting and ordering our world.

According to structuralist critics, a reader brings to the text a predetermined system of ascertaining meaning (a complex system of signs or codes like the sirens and the red light) and applies this sign system directly to the text. The text becomes important because it contains signs or signals to the reader that have established and acceptable interpretations. Many structuralists are therefore more concerned with the overall system of meaning a given society has developed than with textual analysis itself, and concentrate their efforts on what a reader needs to know about interpreting any sign (such as a road sign or a word) in the context of acceptable societal standards. Because of this emphasis, structuralists seem to push both the text and the reader to the background and highlight a linguistic theory of communication and interpretation. Since structuralism has become a springboard for many other modern theories of literary criticism, its significance to literary theory and practical criticism will be explored at length in the next chapter.

Student C represents the second group of reader-response critics. For the most part, these follow Rosenblatt's assumption that the reader is involved in a transactional experience when interpreting a text. The text and the reader, they declare, play somewhat equal parts in the interpretative process. For these critics, reading is an event that culminates in the creation of the poem.

Many adherents of this approach—George Poulet, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Louise Rosenblatt—are associated with phenomenology. Phenomenology is a modern philosophical tendency that emphasizes the perceiver. Objects can have meaning, phenomenologists maintain, only if an active consciousness (a perceiver) absorbs or notes their existence. In other words, objects exist if and only if we register them on our consciousness. Rosenblatt's definition of a poem directly applies this theory to literary study] The true poem can exist only in the reader's consciousness, not on the printed page. When reader and text interact, the poem and therefore meaning are created; they exist only in the consciousness of the reader. [Reading and textual analysis now become an aesthetic experience whereby the reader and the text combine in the consciousness of the reader and create the poem. Like Student C's

interpretation at the beginning of the chapter, the reader's imagination must work, filling in the gaps in the text and conjecturing about characters' actions, personality traits, and motives.

Student D represents the third group of reader-response critics, who place the greatest emphasis on the reader in the interpretative process. For these psychological or subjective critics, the reader's thoughts, beliefs, and experiences play a greater part in shaping a work's meaning than the actual text. Led by Norman Holland and David Bleich, these critics assert that we shape and find our self-identities in the reading process. We impose upon the text, they believe, our ideas, seeing ourselves within the text. By merging our dreams and fantasies with elements within the text, we produce an interpretation that could be accepted by members of our culture.

Acceptance by our social group is the key. Subjective critics assert that when reading a text a reader may respond to something in the text in a bizarre and personal way. These private responses will, through discussion, be pruned away by members of their social group. Finally, the group will decide what is the acceptable interpretation of the text. Like Student D's interpretation, cited at the beginning of this chapter, the reader responds personally to some specific element in the text and then seeks to objectify-this personal response and declares it to be an interpretation of the text itself.

Although reader-response critics all believe the reader plays a part in discovering a text's meaning, just how small or large a part is debatable. Espousing various theoretical assumptions, these critics must necessarily have different methodologies with regard to textual analysis. According to the contemporary critic Steven Mailloux, however, they all share a two^ step procedure which they then adapt to their own theories. All show (1) that a work gives a reader a task or something to do a and (2) the reader's response or answer to that task. For example, Student D, cited at the beginning of this chapter, obviously saw something in the text that triggered his memories of his friend George. He moves, then, from the text to his own thoughts, memories, and past experiences. These personal experiences temporarily overshadow the text, but he realizes that his personal reactions must in some way become acceptable to his peers. He therefore compares George to Huck and himself to Jim and thereby objectifies his

personal feelings while at the same time having his interpretation deemed socially respectable in his "interpretative community" or social setting.

Because the term reader-response criticism allows for so much diversity in theory and methods, many twentieth-century schools of criticism. such as deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, and New Historicism. declare their membership in this broad classification. Each of these approaches to textual analysis provides its own ideological basis to reader-response theory and develops its unique methods of practical criticism. Such an eclectic membership, however, denotes the continued growth and ongoing development of reader-response criticism.

Structuralism

Having narrowed her list of job candidates to two, the personnel director of a large computer company instructed her secretary to invite each applicant in for a job interview. Both seemed equally qualified for the position. Applicant A had graduated from an Ivy League university, earning a B.S. in accounting and business, while applicant B, also a graduate of an Ivy League institution, earned a B.S. in business administration. Each had received outstanding references from his professors and business mentors. And each scored in the 95th percentile on the Graduate Record Examination. The personnel director's choice, no doubt, would be difficult.

On the day of the interview, applicant A arrived wearing a gray suit, a white cotton shirt, a subdued but somewhat bright yellow tie, a pair of highly polished black oxfords, and an appropriate smile and short haircut. Applicant B arrived a few minutes after applicant A's interview had begun. Wearing a green pullover sweater with a yellow shirt collar protruding around the neck, a pair of brown plush corduroys, and neatly polished topsiders, applicant B brushed back his long hair and wondered why the first applicant's interview was lasting more than an hour. After another 15 minutes had passed, applicant A finally exited through the main doors, and the secretary ushered applicant B into the director's office. Eighteen minutes later applicant B passed by the secretary's desk and left the building, his interview apparently over.

Shortly thereafter, the personnel director buzzed for her secretary to come to her office. When he entered, the director instructed him, "Please send applicant A the contract. He will represent our business well. Also, mail applicant B an "I'm sorry, but. .." letter. Evidently he doesn't understand our image, our values, and our standards. Corduroys, no tie, and long hair, in this office and for this company! Never!"

Applicant A's ability to grasp what his future employer valued earned him his job. Through the language of fashion (language being used in a broad sense to mean any system of signs or codes that convey meaning), applicant A demonstrated to the personnel director his understanding of the company's image and its concern for appropriate dress and physical appearance. Applicant B, on the other hand, silently signaled his lack of understanding of the company's values and public

image through his tie- less and seemingly inappropriate attire. While applicant B seemingly failed to master those fashion codes that represented his understanding of the company's standards (or perhaps he didn't really want the job unless he could be his long-haired tieless self), applicant A demonstrated his command of the language of fashion and his potential to learn other similar intricate systems or languages used in such areas as economics, education, the sciences, and social life in general. Through his mastery of these codes and his ability (either consciously or unconsciously) to analyze and employ them correctly in a given situation, applicant A demonstrated his knowledge of structuralism.

Flourishing in the 1960s, structuralism is an approach to literary analysis grounded in structural linguistics, the science of language. By utilizing the techniques, methodologies, and vocabulary of linguistics, structuralism offers a scientific view of how we achieve meaning not only in literary works hut in all forms of communication and social behavior.

To understand structuralism, we must trace its historical roots to the linguistic writings and theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss professor and linguist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is his scientific investigations of language and language theory that provide the basis for structuralism's unique approach to literary analysis.

Historical Development

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, philology, not linguistics, was the science of language. Its practitioners, philologists, described, compared, and analyzed the languages of the world to discover similarities and relationships. Their approach to language study was diachronic; that is, they traced language change through long expanses of time, investigating, for example, how a particular phenomenon in one language had changed through several centuries and whether a similar change could be noted in other languages. Using a cause-and-effect relationship as the basis for their research, the philologists' main emphasis was the historical development of all languages.

Such an emphasis reflected the nineteenth-century philologists' theoretical assumptions about the nature of language. Language, they believed, mirrored the structure of the world it imitated and therefore had no structure of its own.

Known as the mimetic theory of language, this hypothesis asserts that words are symbols for things in the world, each word having its own referent – the object, concept, or idea that represents and/or symbolizes a word. According to this theory, the symbol (the word) equals a thing.

In the first decade of the 1900s, a Swiss philologist and teacher, Ferdinand De Saussure (1857-1913), began questioning these long-held ideas and, by so doing, triggered a reformation in language study. Through his research and his innovative theories, Saussure changed the direction and subject matter of linguistic studies. His Course in General Linguistics, a compilation of his 1906-11 lecture notes published posthumously by his students, is one of the seminal works of modem linguistics and forms the basis for much twentieth-century literary theory and practical criticism. Through the efforts of this father of modern linguistics, nineteenth-century philology evolved into the more multifaceted science of twentieth-century linguistics.

While affirming the validity and necessity of the diachronic approach to language study utilized by nineteenth-century philologists, Saussure introduced the synchronic approach, focusing attention on studying a language at one particular time in its evolution and emphasizing how the language functions- not its historical development. By highlighting the activity of language and how it operates, rather than its evolution, Saussure drew attention to the nature and composition of language and its constituent parts. This new concern necessitated a rethinking of language theory and a reevaluation of the aims of language research, and finally resulted in Saussure's articulating the basic principles of modem linguistics.

Unlike many other linguists of his time, Saussure rejected the mimetic theory of language structure. In its place, he asserted that language is primarily determined by its own internally structured and highly systematized rules,, These rules govern all aspects of a language, including the sounds its speakers will identify as meaningful, various combinations of these sounds into words, and how these words may be arranged to produce meaningful communication within a given language.

By age five or six, native speakers of a language have consciously and unconsciously mastered their language's system of rules—the rules that enable

them to participate in language communication. Although they may not have obviously mastered the advanced elements of their language's grammar, native speakers of English, for instance, would immediately know that the utterance Alice looked up into the ski/ was an acceptable English sentence, but the word combination Alice up the book is somehow incorrect or violates English sentence structure. What this speaker has learned Saussure dubs langue, the structure of the language that is mastered and shared by all its speakers.

While langue emphasizes the social aspect of language, an individual's actual speech utterances Saussure calls parole. A speaker can generate countless examples of individual utterances, but these will all be governed by the language's system, its langue. It is the task of the linguist, Saussure believes, to infer a language's langue from the analysis of many instances of parole. In other words, for Saussure. the proper study of linguistics is the system (langue). not the individual utterances of its speakers (parole).

Having established that languages are systems that operate according to verifiable rules and that they need to be investigated both diachronically and synchronically, Saussure then reexamined philology's definition of a word. Rejecting the long-held belief that a word is a symbol that equals a thing (its referent), Saussure proposed that words are signs made up of two parts: the signifier (a written or spoken mark) and a signified (a For example, when we hear the sound combination ball, the sound is the signifier and the concept of a ball that comes to our minds is the signified. Like the two sides of a sheet of paper, the linguistic sign is the union of these two elements. As oxygen combines with hydrogen to form water, Saussure says, so the signifier joins with the signified to form a sign that has properties unlike those of its parts. Accordingly, a word does not represent a referent in the objective world for Saussure but a concept in our minds.

Furthermore, the linguistic sign, declares Saussure, is arbitrary: the relationship between the signifier (ball) and the signified (the concept of ball) is a matter of convention. The speakers of a language have simply agreed that the written or spoken sounds or marks represented by ball will equal the concept ball. With few exceptions, proclaims Saussure, there is no natural link between the signifier and

the signified, nor is there any natural relationship between the linguistic sign and what it represents.

If, as Saussure maintains, there is no natural link between the linguistic sign and the reality it represents, how do we know the difference between one sign and another? In other words, how does language create meaning? We know what a sign means, says Saussure, because it differs from all other signs. By comparing and contrasting one sign to other signs, we learn to distinguish each individual sign.

For Saussure, is therefore rational and a matter of difference. Within the system of sound markers that comprise our language, we know ball, for instance, because we differentiate it from hall, tail, and pipe.

Likewise, we know the concept "bug" because it differs from the concepts "truck," grass," and "kite." As Saussure declares, "in language there are only differences."

Since signs are arbitrary, conventional, and differential, Saussure concludes that the proper study of language is not an examination of isolated entities but of of the system relationships among them. He asserts, for example, that individual words cannot have meaning by themselves. Because language is a system of rules governing sounds, words, and other components, individual words obtain their meaning only within that system. To know language and how it functions, he declares, we must study the system (langue), not individual utterances (parole) that operate according to the rules of langue.

For Saussure. language.is the primary sign system whereby we structure our world. Language's structure, he believes, is not unlike that of any other sign system of social behavior such as fashion and table manners. Like language, all such expressions of social behavior generate meaning through a system of signs. Saussure proposed a new science called semiology that would study how we create meaning through these signs in all our social behavioral systems. Since language was the chief and most characteristic of all these systems, Saussure declared, it was to be the main branch of semiology. The investigation of all other sign systems would be patterned after language, for like language's signs, the meaning of all signs was arbitrary, conventional, and differential.

Although semiology never became an important new science as Saussure envisioned, a similar science was being proposed in America almost simultaneously by philosopher and teacher Charles Sanders Peirce. Called semiotics, this science borrowed linguistic methods utilized by Saussure and applied them to all meaningful cultural phenomena. Meaning in society, this science of signs declares, can be systematically studied, both in terms of how this meaning occurs and in terms of the structures that allow it to operate. Distinguishing among the various kinds of signs, semiotics as a particular field of study continues to develop today. Because it uses structuralist methods borrowed from Saussure, semiotics and structuralism are terms often used interchangeably, although the former denotes a particular field of study while the latter is more an approach and method of analysis.

Assumptions

Borrowing their linguistic vocabulary, theory, and methods from Saussure and to a smaller degree from Peirce, structuralists—their studies being variously called structuralism, semiotics, stylistics, or narratology—believe that codes, signs, and rules govern all human social and cultural practices, including communication. Whether that communication is the language of fashion as exhibited in the story at the beginning of this chapter, or the language of sports, education, friendship, or literature, each is a systematized combination of codes (signs) governed by rules. Structuralists wish to discover these codes, which they believe give meaning to all our social and cultural customs and behavior. The proper study of meaning and therefore reality, they assert, is an investigation of the system behind these practices, not the individual practices themselves. To discover how all the parts fit together and function is their aim.

Structuralists find meaning, then, in the relationships among the various components of a system. When applied to literature, this principle becomes revolutionary. The proper study of literature, for the structuralists, now involves an inquiry into the conditions surrounding the act of interpretation itself (how literature conveys meaning), not an in-depth investigation of an individual work. Since an individual work can express only those values and beliefs of the system of which it is a part, structuralists emphasize the system (langue) whereby tex{s relate to each other, not an examination of an isolated text (parole). They believe

that a study of the grammar, or the system of rules that govern literary interpretation, becomes the critic's primary task. _

Such a belief presupposes that the structure of literature is similar to the structure of language. Like language, say the structuralists, literature is a self-enclosed system of rules that is composed of language. And also like language, literature needs no outside reference but its own rule- governed, but socially constrained system.

In addition to emphasizing the system of literature and not individual texts, structuralism also claims it demystifies literature. By explaining literature as a system of signs encased in a cultural frame that allows that system to operate, no longer say structuralism, can a literary work be considered to represent mystical or magical relationship between the author and the reader, the place where author and reader share emotions, ideas, and truth. An objective analysis of how readers interpret texts, not a transcendental or intuitive response to any one text, leads to meaning. Similarly, an author's intentions can no longer be equated with the text's overall meaning, for meaning is determined by the system that governs the writer, not by an individual author's own quirks. And no longer can the text be autonomous, an object whose meaning is contained solely within itself. All texts, declare structuralists, are part of a shared system of meaning that is intertextual, not text specific; that is, all texts refer readers to other texts. Meaning, claim the structuralists, can therefore be expressed only through this shared system of relations.

Declaring both isolated text and author to be of little importance, structuralism attempts to strip literature of its magical powers or so-called hidden meanings that can only be discovered by a small, elite group of highly trained specialists. Meaning can be found, it declares, by analyzing the system of rules that comprise literature itself.

Methodology

Like all other approaches to textual analysis, structuralism follows neither one methodological strategy nor one set of ideological assumptions. Although most structuralists use many of Saussure's ideas in formulating their theoretical

assumptions and the foundations for their literary theories, how these assumptions are employed when applied to textual analysis varies greatly.

One of the first scholar/researchers to apply Saussure's principles of linguistics to narrative discourse was the anthropologist Claude Levi- Strauss. Attracted to the rich symbols in myths, Levi-Strauss spent years studying many of the world's myths. Myth, he assumed, possessed a structure like language. Each individual myth was therefore an example of parole. What he wanted to discover was myth's langue, or the overall structure that allows individual examples (parole) to function and have meaning.

After reading countless myths, Levi-Strauss identified recurrent themes running through all of them. These basic structures. which, he called mythemes were similar to the primary building blocks of language. the individual, meaningful sounds of a language called phonemes. Like phonemes, these mythemes find meaning in and through their relationships within the mythic structure. The rules that govern how these mythemes may be combined constitute myth's structure or grammar. The meaning of any individual myth, then, depends on the interaction and order of the mythemes within the story. Out of this structural pattern will come the myth's meaning.

Like our unconscious mastery of our language's langue, we also master myth's structure. Our ability to grasp this structure, says Levi-Strauss is innate. Like language, myths are simply another way we classify and organize our world.

Expanding Levi-Strauss's linguistic model of oral myths to cover a variety of written stories, a group of structuralists called *narratologists* began another kind of structuralism: narratology or structuralist narratology, the science of narrative. Like Saussure and Levi-Strauss, these structuralists illustrate how a story's meaning develops from its overall structure, its langue, rather than from each individual story's isolated theme. The Russian linguist Vladimir Propp, for example, investigated fairy tales and decoded their langue. According to his analysis, all folk or fairy tales are based on 31 fixed elements that will occur in sequence. Any story may use any number of these elements, but each element will occur in its proper sequence.

Another narratologist, the Bulgarian Jzvetan Todorov. declares that all stories are composed of grammatical units. For Todorov, the syntax of narrative—how the

various grammatical elements of a story combine—is essential. By applying a grammatical model to narrative, Todorov believes he can discover the narrative's langue. Establishing a grammar of narrative, Todorov decrees that the grammatical clause, and, in turn, the subject and verb, is the basic interpretative unit of each sentence and can be linguistically analyzed and further dissected into a variety of grammatical categories to show how all narratives are structured.

Other narratologists, such as Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette. have also developed methods of analyzing a story's structure to unearth its meaning, each building on the previous work of another narratologist and adding an additional element or two of his own. Genette, for example, believes that tropes or figures of speech require a reader's special attention. Barthes, on the other hand, points us back to Todorov and provides us with more linguistic terminology to dissect a story. While additional narratologists appear on the scene, each believes that his or her linguistic model when applied to a text will finally allow us to discover the meaning of the story.

By the mid-1970s, Jonathan Culler became the voice of structuralism in America and took structuralism in another direction. In his work Structuralist Poetics, Culler declared that abstract linguistic models used by narratologists tended to focus on parole, spending too much time analyzing individual stories, poems, and novels. What was needed, he believed, was a return to an investigation of langue, Saussure's main premise.

According to Culler, readers, when given a chance, will somehow make sense out of even the most bizarre text. Somehow, readers possess literary competence. They have, says Culler, internalized a set of rules that govern their acts of interpretation. Instead of analyzing individual interpretations of a work, we must spend our time. Culler insists, on analyzing the act of interpretation itself. We must, then, shift the focus from the text to the reader. How, asks Culler, does interpretation take place in the first place? What system underlies the very act of reading that allows any other system to operate?

Unlike other structuralists, Culler presents a What, he asks, is the internalized system of literary competence readers use to interpret a work? In other words, how do they read? What system guides them through the process of interpreting the work, of making sense of the spoken or printed word?

In Structuralist Poetics, Culler asserts that three elements undergird any reading, for instance, of a poem: (1) that a poem should be unified, (2) that it should be thematically significant, and (3) that this significance can take the form of reflection in poetry. Accordingly, Culler then seeks to establish the system, the langue, that undergirds the reading process. J3y focusing on the act of interpretation itself to discover literature's langue. Culler believes he is returning structuralism to its Saussurean roots.

Like Culler's approach to a text, all structuralist methodologies. attempt to reveal the signifying systems that operate in a text. Whereas some structuralists attempt to map out the themes, events, or grammatical structures that they believe will reveal this underlying signifying system, others, like Culler, endeavor to find this system in the act of interpretation itself and not in the text.

Still others believe that the primary signifying system is best found as a series of binary oppositions that the reader organizes, values, and then uses to interpret the text. Each binary operation can be pictured as a fraction, the top half (the numerator) being what is more valued than its related bottom half (the denominator). Accordingly, in the binary operation "light/dark" the reader has learned to value light over dark, and in the binary operation "good/evil" the reader has similarly valued good over evil. How the reader organizes the various binary operations found within the text but already existing in the mind of the reader will determine for that particular reader the text's interpretation.

A structuralist interpretation may, for example, contrast a narrator's reordering of events within the story to the chronological, cause-and-effect order of events present within the story itself. Or it may map out the series of binary operations that the structuralist believes control the story's meanings. It may, for instance, equate one character with goodness and another character with evil. Light may represent good while darkness represents evil. Anything green in the story may be equated with safety while any red object means danger. By mapping out these binary oppositions throughout the text, structuralists would be able, they maintain, to chart how the story's meaning evolves.

No matter what its methodology, structuralism emphasizes form and structure, not actual content of a text. Although individual texts must be analyzed, structuralists are more interested in the rule- governed system that underlies

texts rather than in the texts themselves. How texts mean, not what texts mean, is their chief interest.

Deconstruction

Emerging in the late 1960s as a new strategy for textual analysis and an alternative approach to interpreting literature, poststructuralism captured the attention of American critical theorists. Like structuralism, its immediate predecessor, this new movement is best characterized as an activity or reading strategy, not a philosophy. Unlike other schools of criticism, poststructuralism possesses neither an accepted body of doctrines nor methodologies. Rather than providing answers about the meaning of texts, this critical activity asks questions, endeavoring to show that what a text claims it says and what it actually says are discernibly different. By casting doubt on most previously held theories, poststructuralism declares that a text has an infinite number of possible interpretations. And the interpretations themselves, the poststructuralists posit, are just as creative and important as the text being interpreted.

Although the term poststructuralism presently refers to a variety of theories (New Historicism, for example) that have developed after structuralism, today the terms poststructuralism and deconstruction are often used interchangeably. Coined by its founding father, Jacques Derrida, deconstruction first emerged on the American literary stage in 1966 when Derrida, a French philosopher and teacher, read his paper "Structure, Sign, and Play" at a Johns Hopkins University symposium. By questioning and disputing in this paper the metaphysical assumptions held to be true by Western philosophy since the time of Plata. Derrida inaugurated what many critics believe to be the most intricate and challenging method of textual analysis yet to appear.

Derrida himself, however, would not want deconstruction dubbed a critical theory, a school of criticism, a mode or method of literary criticism, or a philosophy. Nowhere in Derrida's writings does he state the encompassing tenets of his critical approach, nor does he ever present a codified body of deconstructive theory or methodology. Although he gives his views in bits and pieces throughout his works, he believes that he cannot develop a formalized statement of his "rules for reading, interpretation, and writing." Unlike a unified treatise, Derrida claims, his approach to reading (and literary analysis) is more a "strategic device" than a methodology, more a strategy or approach to literature than a school or theory of criticism. Such theories of criticism, he believes, must

identify with a body of knowledge that they decree to be true or to contain truth. It is this assertion (that truth or a core of metaphysical ideals can be definitely believed, articulated, and supported) that Derrida and deconstruction wish to dispute and "deconstruct."

Because deconstruction utilizes previously formulated theories from other schools of criticism, coins many words for its newly established ideas, and challenges beliefs long held by Western culture, many students, teachers, and even critics avoid studying deconstruction, fearing its supposed complexity. But by dividing deconstruction and its assumptions into three smaller areas of study rather than plunging directly into some of its complex terminology, we can begin to grasp this approach to textual analysis. In order to understand deconstruction and its "strategic" approach to a text, then, we must first gain a working knowledge of the historical and philosophical roots of structuralism, a linguistic approach to textual analysis that gained critical attention and popularity in the 1950s and 1960s (see Chapter 5 for a detailed analysis of structuralism). From this school of criticism Derrida borrows the basis of and the starting point for his deconstructive strategy. After examining structuralism, we must then investigate the proposed radical changes Derrida makes in Western philosophy and metaphysics. Such changes, Derrida readily admits, literally turn Western metaphysics on its head. And finally, we must master some new terminology coupled with new philosophical assumptions and their corresponding methodological approaches to textual analysis if we wish to understand and utilize deconstruction's approach to interpreting a text.

Historical Development

Derrida begins formulating his "strategy of reading" by critiquing Ferdinand de Saussure's Course in General Linguistics. Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, dramatically shifted the focus of linguistic science in the early part of the twentieth century. It is his ideas concerning language that form the core of structuralism, the critical body of literary theory from which Derrida borrows one of the major philosophical building blocks of deconstruction.

According to Saussure, structural linguistics (and structuralism itself) rests on a few basic principles. First, language is a system of rules, and these rules govern its every aspect, including individual sounds that comprise a word (the t in cat, for

example), small units that join together to form a word (garden + er = gardener), grammatical relationships between words (such as the rule that a singular subject must combine with a singular verb—for example, in John eats ice cream), and the relationships among all words in a sentence (such as the relationship between the phrase under a tree and all remaining words in the sentence Mary sits under a tree to eat her lunch). Every speaker of a language both consciously and unconsciously learns these rules and knows when they are broken. Speakers of English know, for example, that the sentence Simon grew up to be a brilliant doctor seems correct or follows the rules of the English language but that the sentence Simon up grew a brilliant doctor is somehow incorrect or violates the rules of English. These rules that comprise a language Saussure dubs langue. Saussure recognizes that individual speakers of a language evidence langue in their individual speech utterances, which he calls parole. It is the task of the linguist, Saussure believes, to infer a language's langue from the analysis of many instances of parole.

Emphasizing the systematized nature of language, Saussure then asserts that all languages are composed of basic units or emes._Identifying these paradigms (models) or relationships between the symbols (the letters of the alphabet, for example) in a given language is the job of a linguist. This task becomes especially difficult when the emes in the linguist's native language and those in an unfamiliar language under investigation differ. Generally, linguists must first recognize and understand the various emes in their native language. For example, one eme in all languages is the individual sounds that comprise words. The number of distinct and significant sounds (or phonemes) that comprise a language ranges from the low teens to 60 and above. English, for instance, has approximately 45 phonemes. When, however, is a sound a phoneme that can change the meaning of a group of phonemes (i.e., a word) or simply a variation of a phoneme that is linguistically insignificant? For example, in English the letter t represents the sound /1/. But is there one distinct pronunciation for this sound whenever and wherever it appears in an English word? Is the t in the word tip, for instance, pronounced the same as the t in stop? Obviously no, for the first t is aspirated or pronounced with a greater force of air than the t in stop. In either word, however, a speaker of English could still identify the /t/ as a phoneme, or a distinct sound. If we then replace the t in tip with a d, we now have *dip*, the difference between the two

words being the sounds /t/ and /d/. Upon analysis, we find that these sounds are pronounced in the same location in the mouth but with one difference: /d/ is voiced or pronounced with the vocal cords vibrating, whereas /t/ is unvoiced, with the vocal cords remaining basically still. It is this difference between the sounds /1/ and /d/ that allows us to say that /t/ and /d/ are phonemes or distinct sounds in English. Whether the eme (any linguistic category such as phoneme) is a sound, a minimal unit of grammar such as the adding of an -s in English to form the plural, or any other distinct category of a language, Saussure's basic premise operates: within each eme, distinctions depend on differences^

That distinctions or meaning in language depend on differences within each eme radically changes some fundamental concepts Jong held by linguists preceding Saussure. Before Saussure, linguists believed that the structure of language was mimetic, merely mimicking the outside world; language, then, had no structure of its own. It simply copied its Structure from the reality exhibited in world in which it utilized. Saussure denies that language is intrinsically mimetic and demonstrates that it is primarily determined by its own internal rules, such as phonology (individual sounds), grammar (the principles and rules of a language), and syntax (how words combine within an utterance to form meaning). Furthermore, these rules are highly systematized and structured. But most importantly, Saussure argues that the linguistic sign (the sounds of words and their representations in a language) that comprises language itself is arbitrary and conventional. For example, most languages have different words for the same concept. For instance, the English word man is homme in French. And in English we know that the meaning or function of the word pit exists not because it possesses some innate acoustic quality but because it differs from hit, wit, and lit. In other words, the linguistic sign is composed of two parts: the signifier, or the spoken or written constituent such as the sound /t/ and the orthographic (written) symbol t, and the signified, the concept that is signaled by the signifier. It is this relationship between the signifier (the word dog, for example) and the signified (the concept or the reality behind the word dog) that Saussure maintains is arbitrary and conventional. The linguistic sign, then, is defined by differences that distinguish it from other signs, not by any innate properties.

Believing that our knowledge of the world is shaped by the language that represents it, Saussure insists upon the arbitrary relationship between the

signifier and the signified. By so doing, he undermines the long-held belief that there is some natural link between the word and the thing it represents. For Saussure, meaning in language, then, resides in a systematized combination of sounds that chiefly rely on the differences among these signs, not any innate properties within the signs themselves. It is this concept that meaning in language is determined by the differences among the language signs that Derrida borrows from Saussure as a key building block in the formulation of deconstruction.

Derridean deconstruction begins with and emphatically affirms Saussure's decree that language is a system based on differences. Derrida agrees with Saussure that we can know the meaning of signifiers through and because of their relationships and their differences among themselves. Unlike Saussure, Derrida also applies this reasoning to the signified. Like the signifier, the signified (or concept) can also be known only through its relationships and its differences from other signifiers. Furthermore, declares Derrida, the signified cannot orient or make permanent the meaning of the signifier, for the relationship between the signifier and the signified is both arbitrary and conventional. And, accordingly, signifiers often function as signifiers. For example, in the sentence I filled the glass with milk, the spoken or written word glass is a signifier; its signified is the concept of a container that can be filled. But in the sentence The container was filled with glass, the spoken or written word container, a signified in the previous sentence, is now a signifier, its signified being the concept of an object that can be filled.

Assumptions

Believing that signification (how we arrive at meaning from the linguistic signs in language) is both arbitrary and conventional, Derrida now begins his process of turning Western philosophy on its head: he boldly asserts that the entire history of Western metaphysics from Plato to the present is founded upon a classic, fundamental error: the searching for a transcendental signified, an external point of reference upon which one may build a concept or philosophy. Once found, this transcendental signified would provide ultimate meaning, being the origin of origins, reflecting itself, and as Derrida says, providing a "reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign." It would, in essence, guarantee to those who believe in it that they do exist and have meaning. For example, if we posit that I or self is a transcendental signified, then the concept of self becomes the unifying principle

upon which I structure my world. Objects, concepts, ideas or even people only take on meaning in my world if I filter them through my unifying, ultimate signified: self

Unlike other signifiers, the transcendental signified would have to be understood without comparing it to other signifiers on signifiers. In other words, its meaning would originate directly with itself, not differentially or relationally as does the meaning of all other signifieds or signifiers. These transcendental signifieds would then provide the "center" of meaning, allowing those who believed in them to structure their ideas of reality around these "centers" of truth to Such a center of meaning could not subject itself to structural analysis, for by so doing it would lose its place as a transcendental signified to another center. For example, if I declare the concept self to be my transcendental signified and then learn that my mind or self is composed of the id, the ego, and the superego, I could no longer hold the self or I to be my transcendental signified. In the process of discovering the three parts of my conscious and unconscious mind, I have both structurally analyzed and "decentered" self thus negating it as a transcendental signified.

According to Derrida, Western metaphysics has invented a variety of terms that function as centers: God, reason, origin, being, essence, truth, humanity, beginning, end, and self, to name a few. Each operates as a concept or term that is self-sufficient and self-originating and serves as a transcendental signified. This Western proclivity for desiring a center Derrida names logocentrism: the belief that there is an ultimate reality or center of truth that can serve as the basis for all our thoughts and actions.

That we can never totally free ourselves from our logocentric habit of thinking and our inherited concept of the universe Derrida readily admits. To "decenter" any transcendental signified is to be caught up automatically in the terminology that allows that centering concept to operate. For example, if the concept self functions as my center and I then "discover" my unconscious self, I automatically place in motion a binary operation or two opposing concepts: the self and the unconscious self By decentering and questioning the self, I may cause the unconscious self to become the new center. By questioning the old center. I may establish a new one.

Since the establishing of one center of unity automatically means that another is decentered, Derrida concludes that Western metaphysics is based on a system of binary^ operations or conceptual oppositions. For each center, there exists an opposing center (God/humankind, for example). In addition, Western philosophy decrees that in each of these binary operations or two opposing centers, one concept is superior and defines itself by its opposite or inferior center. We know truth, for instance, because we know deception; we know good because we know bad. It is the creating of these hierarchal binaries as the basis for Western metaphysics to which Derrida objects.

Such a fragile basis for believing what is really real Derrida wishes to dismantle. In the binary oppositions upon which Western metaphysics has built itself from the time of Plato, Derrida declares that one element will always be in a superior position, or privileged while the other be- comes inferior, or unprivileged. According to this way of thinking, the first or top elements in the following list of binary oppositions are privileged, for example: man/woman, human/animal, soul/body, good/bad. Most importantly, Derrida decrees that western thought has long privileged speech over writing. This privileging of speech over writing Derrida calls phonocentrism.

In placing speech in the privileged position, phonocentrism treats writing as inferior. We value, says Derrida, a speaker's words more than the speaker's writing, for words imply presence. Through the vehicle of spoken words, we supposedly learn directly what a speaker is trying to say. From this point of view, writing becomes a mere copy of speech, an attempt to capture the idea that was once spoken. Whereas speech implies presence, writing signifies absence, thereby placing into action another binary opposition: presence/absence.

Since phonocentrism is based on the assumption that speech conveys the meaning or direct ideas of a speaker better than writing (a mere copy of speech), phonocentrism assumes a logocentric way of thinking, that the "self" is the center of meaning and can best ascertain ideas directly from other "selves" through spoken words. Through speaking, the self declares its presence, its significance, and its being (or existence).

Accordingly, Derrida coins the phrase metaphysics of presence to encompass ideas such as logocentrism, phonocentrism, the operation of binary oppositions,

and other notions that Western thought holds concerning language and metaphysics. His objective is to demonstrate the shaky foundations upon which such beliefs have been established. By deconstructing the basic premises of metaphysics of presence, Derrida believes he gives us a strategy for reading that opens up a variety of new interpretations heretofore unseen by those who are bound by the restraints of Western thought.

Methodology

The first stage in a deconstructive reading is to recognize the existence and the operation of binary oppositions in our thinking. One of the most "violent hierarchies" derived from Platonic and Aristotelian thought is speech/writing, with speech being privileged. Consequently, speech is awarded presence, and writing is equated with absence. Being the inferior of the two, writing becomes simply the symbols of speech, a second-hand representation of ideas.

Once the speech/writing hierarchy or any other hierarchy is recognized and acknowledged, Derrida asserts, we can readily revers its elements. Such a reversal is possible since truth is ever-elusive, for we can always decenter the center if any is found. By reversing the hierarchy, Derrida does not wish merely to substitute one hierarchy for another and to involve himself in a negative mode. When the hierarchy is reversed] says Derrida, we can examine those values and beliefs that give rise to both the original hierarchy and the newly created one. Such an examination will reveal how the meaning of terms arises from the differences between them.

In Of *Grammatology*, Derrida spends much time explaining why the speech/writing hierarchy can and must be reversed. In short, he argues that spoken language is a kind of writing which he calls archi-ecriture or arche-writing. Both spoken language and writing, he declares, share common characteristics. Both, for example, involve an encoding or inscription In writing, this coding is obvious, for the written symbols represent various sounds. And in language or speech, a similar encoding exists. As Saussure has already shown, there exists an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified (between the spoken word cat and the concept of cat itself). There is, then, no innate relationship between the spoken word and the concept, object, or idea it represents. Nevertheless, a relationship now exists in English between the spoken word cat

and its concept, thereby implying that some kind of inscription or encoding has taken place.

In Derrida's arche-writing, then, writing becomes privileged while speech becomes unprivileged, for speech is a kind of writing. This being so, Derrida then challenges Western philosophy's concept that human consciousness gives birth to language. Without language (or arche- writing), argues Derrida, there can be no consciousness for consciousness presupposes language. Through arche-writing we impose human consciousness upon the world.

The relationship between any binary hierarchy, however, is always unstable and problematic. It is not Derrida's purpose simply to reverse all binary oppositions that exist in Western thought but rather to show the fragile basis for the establishment hierarchies to gain new insights into language and life. Derrida uses the term supplement to refer to the unstable relationship between elements in a binary operation. For example, in the speech/writing opposition, writing supplements speech and in actuality takes the place of speech (arche-writing). In all binary oppositions such supplementation exists. In the truth/deception hierarchy, for example, Western thought would assert the supremacy of truth over deception, attributing to deception a mere supplementary role. Such a logocentric way of thinking asserts the purity of truth over deception. Upon examination, deception more frequently than not contains at least some truth. And who is to say, asks Derrida, when truth has been spoken, achieved, or even conceived. The purity of truth may simply not exist. In all human activity, then, supplementation operates.

By realizing that supplementation operates in all of Western metaphysics' binary operations, and by inverting the privileged and unprivileged elements, Derrida begins to develop his reading strategy of deconstruction. Once he "turns Western metaphysics on its head," he asserts his answer to logocentrism and other Western elements by coining a new word and concept: difference. The word itself is derived from the DECONSTRUCTION 79

French word differer, meaning (1) to defer, postpone, or delay, and (2) to differ, to be different from. Derrida deliberately coins his word to be ambiguous, taking on both meanings simultaneously. And in French, the word is a pun, for it exists

only in writing; in speech there is no way to tell the difference between the French word difference and Derrida's coined word differance.

Understanding what Derrida means by differance is one of the primary keys to understanding deconstruction. Basically, differance is Derrida's "What if?" question. What if no transcendental signified exists? What if there is no presence in which we can find ultimate truth? What if all our knowledge does not arise from self-identity? What if there is no essence, being, or inherently unifying element in the universe? What then?

The presence of such a transcendental signified would immediately establish the binary operation presence/absence. Since Western metaphysics holds that presence is supreme or privileged and absence unprivileged, Derrida suggests that we temporarily reverse this hierarchy, its now becoming absence/presence. By such a reversal, no longer can we posit a transcendental signified. No longer is there some absolute standard or coherent unity from which all knowledge proceeds and develops. All human knowledge and all self-identity must now spring from difference, not sameness, from absence, not presence.

When such a reversal of Western metaphysics' pivotal binary operation occurs, two dramatic results follow. First: All human knowledge becomes referential that is, we can only know something because it differs from. some other bit of knowledge, not because we can compare this knowledge to any absolute or coherent unity (a transcendental signified). Human knowledge, then, must now be based on difference. We know something because it differs from something else to which it is related. Nothing can now be studied or learned in isolation, for all knowledge becomes Second: We must also forgo closure; that is, since no transcendental signified exists, all interpretations concerning life, self- identity, and knowledge are possible, probable, and legitimate.

But what is the significance of differance when reading texts? If we, like Derrida, assert that differance operates in language and therefore also in writing (Derrida sometimes equates differance and arche-writing), what are the implications for textual analysis? The most obvious answer is that texts lack presence. Once we do away with the transcendental signified and reverse the presence/absence binary operation, texts can no longer have presence; that is, in isolation, texts cannot possess meaning. Since all meaning and knowledge is now based on differences,

no text can simply mean one thing. Texts become intertextual. Meaning evolves from the interrelatedness of one text to many other texts. Like language itself, texts are caught in a dynamic, context-related interchange. Never can we state a text's definitive meaning, for it has none. No longer can we declare one interpretation to be right and another wrong, for meaning in a text is always elusive, always dynamic, always transitory.

The search, then, for the text's correct meaning or the author's so- called intentions becomes meaningless. Since meaning is derived from differences in a dynamic, context-related, ongoing process, all texts have multiple meanings or interpretations. If we assert, as does Derrida, that no transcendental signified exists, then there can exist no absolute or pure meaning supposedly conveyed by authorial intent or professorial dictates. Meaning evolves as we, the readers, interact with the text, with both the readers and the text providing social and cultural context.

A deconstructor would thus begin textual analysis assuming that a text has multiple interpretations and that it allows itself to be reread and thus reinterpreted countless times. Since no one correct interpretation of a text exists, the joy of textual analysis resides in discovering new interpretations each time a text is read or reread. Ultimately, a text's meaning is undecidable, for each reading or rereading can elicit different interpretations.

When beginning the interpretative process, deconstructors seek to overrule their own logocentric and inherited ways of viewing a text. Such revolutionary thinking decrees that they find the binary oppositions at work in the text itself. These binary oppositions, they believe, represent established and accepted ideologies that more frequently than not posit the existence of transcendental signifieds. These binary operations, then, restrict meaning, for they already assume a fixed interpretation of reality or of the universe. They assume, for instance, the existence of truth and falsehood, reason and insanity, good and bad. Realizing that these hierarchies presuppose a fixed and biased way of viewing the world, deconstructors seek out the binary oppositions operating in the text and reverse them. By reversing these hierarchies, deconstructors wish to challenge the fixed views assumed by such hierarchies and the values associated with such rigid beliefs.

By identifying the binary operations that exist in the text, deconstructors can then show the preconceived assumptions upon which most of us base our interpretations. We all, for example, declare some activity, being, or object to be good or bad, valuable or worthless, significant or insignificant. Such values or ideas automatically operate when we write or read a text. By reversing the hierarchies upon which we base our interpretations, deconstructors wish to free us from the constraints of our prejudiced beliefs. Such freedom, they hope, will allow us to see a text from exciting new perspectives or levels that we have never before recognized.

These various levels of a text are not simultaneously perceived by the reader or even the writer of a text. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," for example, many readers believe that the 50 year-old character who shepherds Goodman Brown through his night's visit in the forest is Satan and therefore necessarily an evil character. Brown's own interpretation of this character seems to support this view. According to deconstructionist ideas, as least two binary operations are at work here: good/evil and God/Satan. But what if we reverse these hierarchies? Then the sceptered figure may not be Satan and therefore may not be evil! such a new perspective may dramatically change our interpretation of the text.

According to deconstructors, we cannot simultaneously see both of these views or levels in the story. To discover where the new hierarchy Satan/God or evil/good will lead us in our interpretation, we must suspend our first level of interpretation. We do not, however, forget it, its being locked in our minds. We simply shift our allegiance to another level.

Such oscillating between interpretations, levels, or meanings allows us to see the impossibility of ever choosing a correct interpretation, for meaning is an ongoing activity that is always in progress, always based upon differance. By asking what will happen if we reverse the hierarchies that frame our preconceived ways of thinking, we open ourselves to a never- ending process of interpretation that decrees that no hierarchy or binary operation is right and no other is wrong.

Deconstructors do not wish, then, to set up a new philosophy, a new literary theory of analysis, or a new school of literary criticism. Instead, they present a reading strategy that allows us to make choices concerning the various levels of

interpretation we see operating in a text. All levels, they maintain, have validity. They furthermore believe that their approach to reading frees them and us from ideological allegiances that restrict our finding meaning in a text.

Since meaning, they believe, emerges through interpretation, even the author does not control a text's interpretation. Although writers may have clearly stated intentions concerning their texts, such statements should and must be given little credence. Like language itself, texts have no outside referents (or transcendental signifieds). What an author thinks he or she says or means in a text may be quite different from what is actually written. Deconstructors therefore look for places in the text where the author loses control of language and says what was supposedly not meant to be said. These "slips of language" often occur in questions, figurative language, and strong declarations. By examining these slips and the binary operations that govern them, deconstructors show the undecidability of a text's meaning.

On first glance, a deconstructionist reading strategy may appear to be linear— that is, having a clearly delineated beginning, middle, and end. If this is so, then to apply this strategy to a text, we must (1) discover the binary operations that govern a text, (2) comment on the values, concepts, and ideas behind these operations, (3) reverse these present binary operations, (4) dismantle previously held worldviews, (5) accept the possibility of various levels of a text based on the new binary inversions, and (6) allow the meaning of the text to be undecidable. Although all the above elements do operate in a deconstructionist reading, they may not always operate in this exact sequence. Since we all tend toward logocentrism when reading, for example, we may not note some logocentric binary operations functioning in the text until we have reversed some obvious binary oppositions and are interpreting the text on several levels. In addition, we may never declare such a reading to be complete or finished, for the process of meaning is ongoing, never allowing to pledge allegiance to any one view.

Such a reading strategy disturbs most readers and critics, for it is not a neat, completed package whereby if we follow step A through to step Z we arrive at "the" reading of the text. Since texts have no external referents, their meanings depend on the close interaction of the text, the reader, and social and cultural elements, as does every reading or interpretative process. Denying the organic

unity of a text, deconstructors declare the free play of language in a text. Since language itself is reflexive, not mimetic, we can never stop finding meaning in a text, whether we have read it once or a hundred times.

Overall, deconstruction aims at an ongoing relationship between the interpreter (the critic) and the text- By examining the text alone, deconstructors hope to ask a set of questions that continually challenges the ideological positions of power and authority that dominate literary criticism. And in the process of discovering meaning in a text, they declare that the criticism itself is just as valuable as the creative writing that is being read, thus inverting the creative writing/criticism hierarchy.