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For Annette and Anna

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Critical Worlds

A Selective Tour

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

—Lewis Carroll

This chapter begins to show you how critical theories work—how bringing different contexts to a text will lead you to different insights. Each theory introduced here is presented and illustrated in more detail in a subsequent chapter. But why so many different strategies? Why not just show you the best way to write about literature? Because there isn’t any way that everyone would agree is best for writing about any given work for any given purpose. As we noted in the first chapter, there is no single “correct” reading of a particular text. Some interpretations are no doubt more sophisticated, insightful, stimulating, or useful than others. But for different readers at different times and places, what is best will be a matter of opinion. This claim about readers and interpretations applies, of course, to just about everything, from music to enchiladas—we have different opinions at different times.

When you finish reading this chapter, you should have a pretty good idea of the basic assumptions and strategies of the various approaches treated in the rest of this book. There are many advanced books on theory and history, and you’ll find some recommendations for further reading at the end of this chapter. But the emphasis throughout this book will be on what is practical—on how to use critical theories.
It's entirely possible that you are encountering some or all of these critical strategies for the first time, and your prior experience with literature may also be limited; don't be dismayed if some of the terms and ideas are unfamiliar and a bit challenging. In subsequent chapters, each approach and its use in the process of writing about literature will be explained in more detail. The brief excursions in this chapter are a preview. You may well want to use this chapter as a review, according to the order you've read the other chapters. As you may have noticed, there are brief summaries of these theories inside the front cover for handy reference. Also, an appendix includes a very brief consideration of how different theories relate to one another.

To allow you to compare and contrast different theories, I illustrate how each one might be applied to the same excerpt, an excerpt from Brendan Gill's *Here at the New Yorker.* It's a wonderful passage, and since it will be used for all the theories presented here, you'll want to read it carefully:

When I started at The New Yorker, I felt an unshakable confidence in my talent and intelligence. I revelled in them openly, like a dolphin diving skyward out of the sea. After almost forty years, my assurance is less than it was; the revels, such as they are, take place in becoming seclusion. This steady progress downward in the amount of one's confidence is a commonplace at the magazine—one might almost call it a tradition. Again and again, some writer who has made a name for himself in the world will begin to write for us and will discover as if for the first time how difficult writing is. The machinery of benign skepticism that surrounds and besets him in the form of editors, copy editors, and checkers, to say nothing of fellow-writers, digs a yawning pit an inch or so beyond his desk. He hears it repeated as gospel that there are not three people in all America who can set down a simple declarative sentence correctly; what are the odds against his being one of this tiny elect?

In some cases, the pressure of all those doubting eyes upon his copy is more than the writer can bear. When the galleys of a piece are placed in front of him, covered with scores, perhaps hundreds, of pencilled hen-tracks of inquiry, suggestion, and correction, he may sense not the glory of creation but the threat of being stung to death by an army of gnats. Upon which he may think of nothing better to do than lower his head onto his blotter and burst into tears. Thanks to the hen-tracks and the consequences, the piece will be much improved, but the author of it will be pitched into a state of graver self-doubt than ever. Poor devil, he will type out his name on a sheet of paper and stare at it long and long, with dumb uncertainty. It looks—oh, Christ!—his name looks as if it could stand some working on.

As I was writing the above, Gardner Botsford, the editor who, among other duties, handles the copy for "Theatre," came into my office with the galleys of my latest play review in his hand. Wearing an expression of solemnity, he said, "I am obliged to inform you that Miss Gould has found a buried dangling modifier in one of your sentences." Miss Gould is our head copy editor and unquestionably knows as much about English grammar as anyone alive. Gerunds, predicate nominatives, and passive periphrastic conjugations are mother's milk to her, as they are not to me. Nevertheless, I boldly challenged her allegation. My prose was surely correct in every way. Botsford placed the galleys before me and indicated the offending sentence, which ran, "I am told that in her ninth decade this beautiful woman's only complaint in respect to her role is that she doesn't have enough work to do."

I glared blankly at the galleys. Humilitating enough to have buried a dangling modifier unawares; still more humiliating not to be able to disinter it. Botsford came to my rescue. "Miss Gould points out that as the sentence is written, the meaning is that the complaint is in its ninth decade and has, moreover, suddenly and unaccountably assumed the female gender." I said that in my opinion the sentence could only be made worse by being corrected—it was plain that "The only complaint of this beautiful woman in her ninth decade. . ." would hang on the page as heavy as a sash-weight. "Quite so," said Botsford. "There are times when to be right is wrong, and this is one of them. The sentence stands." (7-8)

What can you say about this passage? How can an understanding of different critical strategies give you more options, more material to work with? Let's begin with New Criticism, the critical approach that transformed the study of literature in the modern age. It's no longer "new," but New Criticism is still a pervasively influential way of looking at literary texts.

**New Criticism**

New Criticism focuses attention on the work itself, not the reader or the author or anything else. New Critics are not allergic to talking about the responses of readers or the intentions of authors, but they believe that the work itself ultimately must stand on its own as an artistic object. This commitment to the work itself as an aesthetic object is what made the New Critics' strategies distinctive and "new." The purpose of giving attention to the work itself is, first, to expose the work's unity. In a unified work, every element works together toward a theme. Every element is essential. In addition, the "close
“reading” (a phrase popularized by New Critics) of a literary work reveals its complexity. Great literature, New Critics assume, contains oppositions, ambiguities, ironies, tensions; these are unified by the work—if it is successful by the standards of New Criticism.

So how does one do New Criticism? Begin by reading closely. Since everything should contribute to the work’s unity—figures of speech, point of view, diction, imagery, recurrent ideas or events, and so forth—then careful analysis of any aspect of the work should be revealing. Look for oppositions, tensions, ambiguities. These add complexity to the work’s unity. A mediocre work might be unified but have little complexity, or it might be complex but never really come together. The New Critic, ultimately, shows how the various elements of a great work unify it.

My New Critical reading of this passage was developed by reading carefully, marking up the text, asking myself questions, drafting answers to the questions, brainstorming and freewriting, and then putting my ideas together. Although this reading didn’t just pop out of my head, it wasn’t a frustrating struggle because I knew what I was trying to do, and I was confident that my assumptions and strategies would eventually produce something interesting. Specifically, I knew that a New Critical reading would identify some tension (or irony, or opposition) in the text, and I immediately saw that some tensions in the story are pretty clear:

- editor vs. writer
- the world vs. the New Yorker
- grammar vs. style
- confidence vs. doubt
- right vs. wrong

I also knew that such tensions must somehow be resolved if the text succeeds (by New Critical standards). Therefore, how the text ends is especially important from a New Critical perspective.

New Critics might have some trouble with the idea of an “ending” in this case, because the “work” I’ve chosen is not really a work, but rather an excerpt from a work. But for the purposes of demonstration, let’s imagine this passage stands alone, entitled “Writing a Wrong.” This title, as is often the case, points toward the unifying idea that I am finding in the work. Endings are crucial, especially for New Critics, and this reading focuses on the reconciliation at the end, when Botsford pronounces “right is wrong.” As a New Critic, I had to consider, “How does this idea—‘right is wrong’—unify or resolve the work in a complex or ambiguous way?” In other words, what conflicting ideas are at work in the passage that are brought into balance and harmony by this theme? So, New Criticism invites you to do three things: focus on the text’s details and read closely; look for oppositions, ironies, tensions; show how the work’s complexity is artistically unified.

You’ll benefit most, I think, if you try to sketch out your own New Critical reading before (and perhaps after) you read mine.

**The Paradoxical Unity of “Writing a Wrong”**

In Brendan Gill’s story of a dangling modifier, “Writing a Wrong,” the editor Botsford solves the conflict between Miss Gould’s rules and Gill’s taste. He does so by offering a paradox that unifies Gill’s story: sometimes “right is wrong.” Botsford says. It turns out that Miss Gould was right to spot the error, but Gill was right to have written the sentence as he did. The irony of this solution is reinforced by various paradoxical images in the story.

For example, the dolphin in the second sentence is “diving skyward.” This action simultaneously suggests a downward movement (“diving”) and an upward motion (“skyward”). The description thus embodies the same sort of logic as a wrong rightness. Likewise, the “progress downward” of the writer and even his “becoming seclusion” (“becoming”—attractive and appealing to others; “seclusion”—unknown to others) convey the same kind of image. In larger terms, the writer’s “unshakable confidence” quickly becomes a “dumb uncertainty”—which again suggests the kind of reversal that resolves the story.

In such an upside-down world we would expect to find imagery of struggle and violence, and we do encounter a “yawning pit” and an “army of gnats.” Such tension is harmonized by Gill’s brilliant conclusion: in writing, conducted properly, the demands of correctness and style are unified by the writer’s poetic instincts. Similarly, the story itself is resolved by the notion of a correct error.

**Reader-Response Criticism**

Reader-response criticism starts from the idea that the critic’s interest ultimately ought to be focused on the reader rather than the text itself or the author. Without readers, it seems safe to say, there would be little reason to talk about literature; it is the reader who brings the text to life, who gives it meaning. Otherwise, it’s just black marks on a white page.

The reader-response critic focuses on the reader’s activity in one of two ways: by describing how readers should respond to the text or by giving the critic’s own personal response. That is, the reader-response critic either is claiming to be describing what is “normal,” or
conventional, or ideal, or implied by the text; or the critic is expressing that which is personal, subjective, perhaps even eccentric. One could argue that reader-response critics are always engaging in subjective response, even when they think they’re objectively describing “the” response. In any event, reader-response critics tend to deal with works eliciting responses that are somehow noteworthy.

How does one do reader-response criticism? If the goal is to offer a personal, subjective response, one simply reads the text and responds. As you can imagine, such a strategy has been especially popular because it really liberates the reader. It’s difficult to see how any response could be wrong: who could say, No, that isn’t your response? Some responses may seem richer than others; some responses may seem to deal more fully with the text; some responses may seem more authentic and honest than others. But any particular response may well help another reader to a more interesting or satisfying experience of the work.

If the idea is to describe how a reader ought to respond, which might better be called “reader-reception” criticism, then you’ll need to try to suppress whatever is personal in your response and offer instead an “ideal” response, one that is (or rather ought to be) shared by all attentive and intelligent readers. Describing in careful detail the slow-motion progress of a hypothetical reader through the text, such “objective” or receptive reader-response criticism may consider these kinds of questions: What expectations does the text create? What happens to those expectations? (Are they met, undermined, exploited, transformed, denied?) What literary conventions does the text employ to affect the reader? How, in other words, does the text shape the reader’s response?

Although I’m presenting these two versions of reader-response criticism as oppositions, flip sides of a single coin, it may be more accurate and helpful to see them in terms of a progression. Reader-response critics unavoidably must use their own personal responses as a starting point for talking about how the ideal, or implied, or common reader responds; but the close examination of such “ideal” responses would seem inevitably to reveal some personal and subjective features. (No one, I would suggest, not even the author, can be the ideal reader.)

The following essay tries to present a record of my movement through this passage. It was fairly easy and fun to write because I simply read through the passage slowly and asked myself, “Okay, how am I responding now? What does this make me think? What am I expecting next?” Although I decided that the passage was continually surprising me, I would not argue that surprise is the only or the correct response: I might have focused on the passage’s humor, on a pervading sense of doom, or something else. That’s the beauty of reader-response criticism: different responses. As a piece of reader-response criticism, this essay strives to be neither rabidly subjective nor dogmatically objective. I focus on my personal response, but I also try to play the role that I believe Gill has imagined. I quote the text repeatedly, trying to show my reader exactly what I’m responding to.

The Reader’s Surprise in an Excerpt from Here at “The New Yorker”

Beginning with its first sentence, the story of the buried dangling modifier in Brendan Gill’s Here at “The New Yorker” is continually surprising, setting up expectations and then knocking them down. Gill begins the first sentence with “When I started at The New Yorker,” and I naturally expect him to talk about how nervous and insecure he was starting off at one of the largest and most famous magazines in the world. Instead, Gill refers to his “unshakable confidence.” The third sentence begins with “After almost forty years,” leading me to expect some explanation of how his joy at the magazine has grown. But 40 years of experience, it turns out, have not developed Gill’s confidence and happiness. Instead, his “assurance is less than it was.” How, I must wonder, has he managed to work through all 40 years and yet grow less confident?

Expecting Gill to explain the oddity of his deteriorating confidence, I find, surprisingly, that such an effect “is a commonplace at the magazine,” a “tradition” even. Since the loss of confidence occurs for everyone, we might then expect that the New Yorker staff sticks together, sharing insecurities and supporting each other. Such is hardly the case, as Gill continues to surprise me by tracing one imaginary writer’s loss of confidence to the point of what appears to be a nervous breakdown. The writer, who is said to have “made a name for himself in the world,” is reduced to weeping on his blotter and trying to revise his name. Such is not what I expect from a famous writer.

Given this tradition of disaster, it seems clear to me that Gardner Botsford is appearing in the third paragraph to star in the story of Gill’s own downfall. Botsford points to a major error Gill has made, and Gill’s assertion that he “boldly challenged” the allegation seems to set him up for a major humiliation. “Unshakable” confidence and bold challenges certainly seem unwarranted in the atmosphere of the New Yorker. But, once more, Gill crosses me up and provides a story of triumph. Rather than undermining his confidence, which is what everything in the story suggests will happen, Botsford becomes Gill’s champion. “The sentence stands,” he says, as the last reversal provides a happy ending.
Structuralist and Deconstructive Criticism

Language makes meaning by oppositions: we know what "good" means because it is the opposite of "bad"; "tired" means something to us because it is the opposite of "rested." So words make sense because of their relationship to other words, not because of any "natural" grounding in reality. Although we may like to think "bad" and "rested" refer to something solid and real, they don't. "Bad" has come to mean "good" in certain contexts. It could come to mean "blue," or "hungry," or anything. "Rested" with regard to a fighter pilot during combat may mean "having had three hours' sleep in the last twenty-four." Meaning is relative and relational, based on language's structure. So a structuralist reading of a text exposes the system of meaning that is at work in that text. Structuralism is thus a bit like New Criticism, except that structuralists are interested in an individual text not so much as an artistic object, but as an example of a system of meaning.

Deconstructive criticism, in a sense, takes the insights of structuralism (meaning is made by a binary structure) or New Criticism (literary works unify oppositions) and reverses or inverts or explodes them. Whereas New Criticism aims to reveal the coherence and unity of the work, deconstruction aims to expose the gaps, the incoherences, the contradictions of the text. Whereas a structuralist reading of a text reveals its underlying system of meaning, a deconstructive reading shows how the system falls apart. Deconstructive critics assume that gaps are present in texts because of what they assume about the arbitrary and unstable nature of language. By taking texts apart—undoing them until we see how a text inevitably contradicts itself, containing traces of its opposite or "other"—deconstructive critics are able to call into question many of our settled and comfortable assumptions. Depending on how you feel about these assumptions (truths or prejudices?), deconstruction will seem scandalously offensive or delightfully inventive.

One of the many ironies of deconstruction, it appears, is that any effort to explain deconstruction is doomed according to the theory itself. Any effort to say anything, in fact, must go astray. Such an assumption could be dismaying, but many deconstructive critics have chosen to adopt a comic and even shocking stance, practicing a critical strategy that by its own definition cannot be defined. Although deconstructive criticism can be very difficult to read (perhaps as an illustration of how language eventually fails?), it can also be very amusing and engaging—and a lot of fun to try.

Thus, deconstructing a text calls for careful reading and a bit of creativity. One way to think of your goal as a deconstructive critic is that you're trying to turn the text against itself. For instance, Botsford's concluding decision, "The sentence stands," may appear to be reassuring. Here is a case where a writer makes a mistake, but the mistake turns out to be okay. If we were to press this reading, however, asking if the text might say something other than what it appears to say, we may begin to move into the realm of deconstruction. If you are a student in a writing-about-literature class, I suspect that Gill's passage is only superficially comforting. If a writer at the New Yorker can't always tell whether a sentence is right or wrong—if in fact the rules of writing are so complex that not even three people in America "can set down a simple declarative sentence correctly"—then how is a college student to feel? If a grown man and an established writer is weeping onto his desk blotter and considering revising his name, then how can the ordinary student hope to write an error-free paper—especially when the rules seem to apply in one case and not in another, and the rules for determining such exceptions don't seem to exist but are instead invented and applied by those who happen to be in charge?

Writing becomes a nightmare.

In fact, one might observe that Botsford's "reassuring" vindication is deceptive, for he does not actually say that sometimes right is wrong and wrong is right. He only says that sometimes "right is wrong." But Botsford's apparent reversal of the dismantling of authors at the New Yorker is finally ambiguous, since we never know if the writer is ever correct, no matter what he does: "The sentence stands" indeed, but it stands with its error intact, a monument to Gill's inability to correct it and to the inevitable errors of writing—a monument to the way language masters us.

Although deconstructive critics may well deal with obviously major features of a text, like its ending, they may also choose some marginal element of the text and vigorously explore its oppositions, reversals, and ambiguities. In fact, for some critics, deconstruction is simply a name for "close reading" of an especially rigorous kind. The deconstructive critic, for example, might well decide to concentrate on the assertion that because of the editors' merciless correction, "the piece will be much improved." A New Critic, I think, would not be very likely to consider this assertion central, the key to the passage. But a deconstructive critic might. Here is what happened when I turned around the idea that "the piece will be much improved" and questioned it.

"The Sentence Stands" Triumphant: A Deconstructive Reading

In Here at "The New Yorker," Brendan Gill offers an anecdote that clearly sets the world's writers against the editors, and the latter control the game. Gill has written an essay, but the editors and their accomplices,
the checkers and copy editors, get to say what is wrong with it. They get to
dig the “yawning pit” in front of the helpless writer’s desk; they determine
the “tiny elect” who can write correctly; they make the scores and hun-
dreds of “hen-tracks” on the writer’s manuscript, which serve as testimony
to the incompetence of writers, the near-impossibility of writing, and the
arbitrary power of the editor.

To be sure, it is acknowledged that these editorial assaults upon the
writer serve their purpose, for “thanks to the hen-tracks and their conse-
quences, the piece will be much improved.” But the cost is terrible. Not
only is the writer unable to write his own name with any confidence; he
has also become a “poor devil,” outside “the elect.” In delivering his writing
over to the editors, conceding their dominance, the writer inevitably places
his own identity, perhaps even his very soul, in jeopardy. Thus, the cry, “oh,
Christ!” comes to be an invocation to the only power who can save the
writer from the devil and the editor’s destructive forces.

But this story of the hopelessness of writers also reveals that the
kingdom of editors is based upon a lie: It simply is not true, despite the
beleaguered writer’s admission under torture, that “the piece will be
much improved” by editorial intervention. In this instance, Miss Gould’s
enormous grammatical lore does not in fact improve the piece at all; her
effort nearly made it “worse.” And Botsford’s contribution as editor
involves simply leaving the piece as it was written—a strange method of
improvement! So who is in charge—writers or editors?

In the end, Gill can never again become like the gill-less dolphin of
the first paragraph, confidently “diving skyward,” because the dangling modifier
defiantly remains: it is a part of the sea of language the author cannot leave.
In the end, both writer and editor are defeated by their inability to control
their language. The status of the writer at the New Yorker becomes a para-
digm for the alarming status of writing itself: deceptive, mute, and
intractable, “the sentence stands,” neither improved nor made worse,
standing really for nothing that is under the writer’s or editor’s rule.

**Historical, Postcolonial, and Cultural Studies**

One way to think about literature is to consider the people who wrote
it and have read it. Not the text itself (New Criticism), not the
reader’s reactions (reader-response), not the system of language at
work in the text (structuralism), not how the text falls apart (decon-
struction), but rather the life and times of the author and the read-
ers. It is a fascinating approach, appealing to our natural curiosity:
Inquiring minds want to know how great works of art came into
being, and whether great writers are ordinary people, or eccentrics,
or something else, and whether other readers see things the way we do.

Writers must live and write in particular places and particular times,
and so biographical research is intertwined with historical research.
“History” includes the history of literature, so the effort to enrich our
understanding of a work by examining the conditions of its produc-
tion can usefully include studying the literary tradition. Literature,
which can both reflect and influence history, has proved in recent
decades to be an especially revealing resource for thinking about
colonial and postcolonial cultures.

In theory, this approach to criticism is simple: just find out the bi-
ographical and historical facts and see how they illuminate the litera-
ture. If you are reading a novel set in the Vietnam War, wouldn’t you
like to know if the author perhaps fought in that war, or protested
against it, or both? Are there letters from that period of the author’s
life? Wouldn’t it also be helpful to know the history of the Vietnam
War? And be familiar with other novels written about this war? And
even literary works about other wars?

Of course we cannot know everything, and we don’t always know
what we don’t know, as Yogi Berra might have said. And so the dis-
covered by new historical or biographical facts may substantially or
entirely alter our perception. What if a work that we thought was writ-
ten by a combat veteran turns out actually to be written by a journalist
who never saw a battle? Or by a soldier’s mother, who never even vis-
ited Vietnam? One reasonable response to these questions would be
that such information doesn’t matter at all. The text of the work isn’t
altered by this information. If one accepts this response, then the
value of historical criticism is certainly diminished. It may be interest-
ing to learn about the author’s biography and the relevant history,
but if the text is all we need, then this information is extraneous to
the work, nonessential.

The validity and importance of biographical and historical criti-
cism can however be defended. For starters, some readers have larger
purposes than simply appreciating a literary work. If readers want to
understand the insights and expressions of a brilliant mind, or of an
age, then the work itself is just the visible part of a much larger pic-
ture. Further, a writer’s audience inevitably has knowledge and
assumptions that are not immediately available to a later audience,
removed in time and space. In other words, even if the reader’s inter-
est is limited to the literary work, biographical and historical research
are still valuable, arguably crucial, to an understanding of the work
itself. It would be, however, a naïve mistake to equate writers with
their work: If we learn that a writer protested against the Vietnam
War, we should not therefore assume that his novel is a political state-
ment against the war. It might be, but he might also have changed his
mind, or grown tired of that issue and is working on some other
problem in the novel. Or the work, read carefully, might actually support an unintended point of view. Biographical and historical research can highlight certain aspects of a work for us, calling our attention to one thing or another, suggesting ways of reading, but the work itself must still somehow support the argument.

In the last half-century or so, even more fundamental problems have been raised regarding our traditional views of history and biography. New ways of thinking about language and meaning, coming out of structuralism and post-structuralism, have led to a movement called “New Historicism” (often called “cultural materialism” in Great Britain), which emphasizes that it is no longer possible to assume that there are stable “facts” objectively out there, waiting to be discovered; instead, all we really have access to is an indeterminate number of texts waiting on a process of interpretation. Hence, new historicists shift their attention away from trying to determine what “really” happened, and toward exploring how different versions of history are made. Since history is unavoidably motivated by the interests and values of the historian, it cannot be objective. Literature, biography, and history from this perspective all participate in creating a “discourse,” which embodies a set of values and assumptions. As a result, literary critics who embrace new historicism end up reading all sorts of texts—literary works, newspapers, advertisements, graffiti, anything that can be used to expose the discourse that is at work.

But how is this “new”? Or for that matter, “historical”? Haven’t good historians always doubted the objectivity of their “facts,” and haven’t they always looked for coherent systems for making meaning? Perhaps the key distinction of New Historicism is that history itself becomes textual. The point is not that New Historicists deny Shakespeare’s existence, for instance; it is rather that “Shakespeare” for us is meaningful only as a text—or rather as a whole range of texts that construct the meaning of that name, which is constantly evolving. In a sense, Shakespeare’s existence is not a fact, but “Shakespeare” is rather a name that marks the site of a struggle—the struggle to create Shakespeare. New Historicism encourages readers to connect all sorts of texts, extending beyond literary texts to build an understanding of the web of culture at a particular time. New Historicism gives up the quest to find singular causes for historical events, and attempts instead to identify an ideology—or ideologies—at work in a particular time and place. Rather than moving through time, to put this another way, from an origin which leads to an effect, which leads to another event, New Historicists move in a sense through space, reading poems, advertisements, music, novels, law textbooks, medical texts, children’s stories, graffiti, anything—as if they were intellectual archaeologists revealing what drives disparate aspects of a culture.

Postcolonial criticism is in some ways similar to new historicism: postcolonial criticism examines the shaping ideas and values in a particular kind of culture. That kind of culture is one that has been colonized—subjected to the rule of another, or an “other.” Literature is often an important part of the way a ruling power thinks about and influences its subjects, and also an important feature of the way the “native” people both absorb and resist the colonizing power. Like New Historicism, postcolonial criticism is not restricted to the analysis of literary texts, but rather seeks to connect any grouping of texts that may help us to understand the complex relationships of a dominant to a dominated culture. The goal here is to intervene: to expose the way that one culture represents and therefore controls another, and thereby to undermine that power. Thus, the excluded, repressed, “savage,” “primitive” culture can be rewritten in other terms.

The idea of writing about culture as a way of intervening in culture is also at the heart of cultural studies. Cultural studies, like new historicism and postcolonial criticism, assumes that meaning is constructed. That means, for instance, that we cannot assume European culture, with its technological and industrial achievements, is superior to some other culture; we cannot assume that the Seinfeld Show is inferior to Hamlet. The popularity of cultural studies derives in part from this dizzyingly liberating erasure of our assumptions, which may be no more than our prejudices. Cultural values are invented, and cultural studies seeks to expose the systems of meaning-making that create the worlds of culture that human beings inhabit. Cultural studies is indeed so open in terms of what it studies and the methods that are employed, that even its adherents are not entirely clear or united regarding what cultural studies is. But people who say they are “doing” cultural studies do appear to share, it seems, a commitment to a radical or alternative political stance. That is, they seem to be exposing how culture works from an antagonistic or at least questioning perspective. This stance is not surprising, given cultural studies’ roots in post-structuralism (emphasizing the arbitrariness of meaning) and Marxism (emphasizing the shaping power of economics and class).

Because new historical, postcolonial, and cultural studies require readers not only to control a literary text, but also to assemble diverse historical materials into coherent systems of meaning, these strategies are likely to seem more appropriate for advanced students. Biography and history, however, are fascinating (as the success of People magazine and the History Channel perhaps suggest), and students at almost any level will benefit from efforts to link the work to its world. The following passage illustrates briefly how even a little biographical and historical research can be applied to a text, drawing on both traditional and new historical strategies.
"To Take a Favorable View":
Brendan Gill and the Writer’s Depression

Brendan Gill began working at the *New Yorker* in 1936—"almost forty years ago," as he says in *Here at The New Yorker,"* published in 1975. Thus, the "unshakable" confidence that Gill mentions in the first sentence of the excerpt quoted above is particularly remarkable for having arisen in the midst of the Great Depression, with failure and fear of failure presumably rampant all around him. It appears that the confidence is extraordinarily fragile, however, as the writer who is reveling in his talent and intelligence as the passage begins is bursting into tears, his head on his blotter, before many more sentences pass by. Does the skepticism and correction really account for this collapse? Did real writers typically experience emotional collapses at the magazine? Does Gill really believe that at any time between 1935 and 1975 fewer than three people "in all America" could "set down a simple declarative sentence correctly"?

Although Gill's book is presented as a memoir, an autobiography, the reality of his life begins to seem a bit elusive. Elsewhere in *Here at The New Yorker,"* for instance, Gill writes, "I am always so ready to take a favorable view of my powers that even when I am caught out and made a fool of, I manage to twist this circumstance about until it becomes a proof of how exceptional I am." (62). Obviously, this sentiment is not consistent with the weeping writer, his confidence shattered. In another passage, Gill writes, "I started out at the place where I wanted most to be and with much pleasure and very little labor have remained here since." (24). This comment also does not sound at all like the experience of the sobbing writer with "hundreds" of "hen-tracks of inquiry," endlessly revising even his name. In fact, the writer whose confidence has been broken, who cannot bear "all those doubting eyes upon his copy," is not, strictly speaking, Gill. It is "some writer who has made a name for himself in the world," the generic writer, not Gill personally, who is crushed into a state of "dumb uncertainty" by his service at the New Yorker. Gill says only that after "almost forty years, my assurance is less than it was." Why does Gill mention this typical writer, suggesting—despite contrary evidence elsewhere—that his own career follows this same structural path?

The structure of the passage, the story of the dangling modifier, involves three movements: First, the writer exudes mastery and confidence; then, the writer falls into doubt and uncertainty; finally, the writer is vindicated, his confidence restored. It is this structure that shapes the autobiography Gill presents: "unshakable confidence," "progress downward," "rescue," and vindication. Thus, the anecdote becomes an example of his experience at the magazine, which is one instance of everyone's experience at the magazine. This structure is of course a pervasive one, easily relevant to both the mid-1930s (the passage's starting point) and the mid-1970s (where it ends). Both the mid-1930s and mid-1970s followed periods of exuberant assurance, and represented times of doubt and crisis, as Americans struggled to rise above the depression in 1935 and the Vietnam War in 1975. Like many narratives, Gill's life as he presents it here fits the national paradigm. This structure suggests a positive view of history: Although writers lose their confidence, it can be restored, just as a depression or war can be surmounted. This plot structure is reassuring, giving shape to biography and history.

**Psychological Criticism**

Anyone whose writing is evaluated will be intrigued, I think, by what Gill's passage implies about the psychological effects of criticism. You too may have felt at some point the discomfort of "pencilled hen-tracks of inquiry, suggestion, and correction." The passage provides a good opportunity to consider how such feelings arise and what purpose, if any, they serve. You don't, in other words, have to be a psychologist in order to do psychological criticism. Common sense and an interest in human thinking and behavior are the only essentials.

Still, psychological concepts can be valuable and stimulating in writing about literature. Take, for instance, the idea put forward by Sigmund Freud that creative writing is like dreaming: both allow wishes or fears to be fulfilled that would otherwise be suppressed. A desire or a fear too powerful to be confronted directly can be disguised by the unconscious and expressed by the author or dreamer, Freud said. One possible task of the psychological critic, then, like the psychologist, would be to decode what is being disguised. The critic may make educated guesses about what has been repressed and transformed by the author, or by characters, or even by other readers.

Another useful psychological concept is the idea that there are basic patterns of human development, even though everyone's formative history is different in particulars. One of the most famous and controversial of these developmental concepts is Freud's idea of the Oedipus complex. In Greek myth, Oedipus was the man who unknowingly murdered his father and married his mother. For Freud, this myth depicted the infantile desire experienced by all little boys, who want to see the mother as the principal object of their affections and resent sharing her with the father. The Oedipus complex comes about when this sensual desire for the mother is not suppressed. And the vehicle for this suppression, Freud argued, is the young boy's recognition that the father is more powerful. Rather than lose his capability for pleasure, the boy pulls back from his focus on the mother and eventually turns his desires elsewhere. At its most instinctual level, Freud maintained, the threat to the boy's sexuality is perceived as a threat to that which determines his sex: It is ultimately a fear of castration that motivates the boy's withdrawal.
Although many of Freud's ideas, including the Oedipus complex, have been vigorously challenged or revised, especially by post-structuralist and feminist thinkers, his work has formed the basis for modern psychology. Many of his ideas are so well known that any educated person can be expected to be familiar with them. It would be difficult to go very far toward understanding psychology or psychological criticism today without some awareness of Freud, who relied heavily on literature in developing his ideas. By no means, however, should you infer that psychological criticism means Freudian criticism. Other approaches are welcome. But since an introduction to the field of psychology isn't practical here, I've elected to indicate simply how psychological concepts can be applied by using Freud, who is arguably the most important single figure. If you can apply Freud, you can apply Abraham Maslow or Luce Irigaray or whomever.

The following essay was developed primarily by applying Freud's central theory of the Oedipus complex to Gill's passage.

A Psychological Reading of Gill's Passage

Writers are brought into the world by editors, and Brendan Gill is thus in a sense the product of Miss Gould and Gardner Botsford's union. Gardner Botsford imposes the grammatical law in a fatherly enough way, but his counterpart, Miss Gould, functions only as a kind of uncreating anti-mother: she is a "Miss," and her notion of "mother's milk" is truly indigestible—"gerunds, predicate nominatives, and passive periphrastic conjugations." She nurtures neither writing nor writer.

But, at the same time, the well-being of the writers at the New Yorker depends on her approval because, like Gill, they have accepted the criterion of correctness as the law of the father. Miss Gould imposes that law to the letter, undermining the writer's self-esteem until finally his very identity is threatened, plunging him into such "self-doubt" that his name is called into question. He may then become an orphan; his work may be abandoned.

In fact, the source of the writer's neurotic breakdown seems to be the linking of self to writing. Although the many corrections are imprinted upon the paper, Gill shifts them to the writer and transforms them from "pencilled hen-tracks" into stings. It is not, as we might suppose, the particular work that may be attacked so much that it dies, but rather the writer who may be "stung to death by an army of gnats." Gnats do not, so far as I know anyway, have stingers; they bite. The displacement here, one might argue, is the result of the writer's sense of personal vulnerability, making the threat more plausible since being bitten to death by gnats sounds absurd, while being stung is more ominous.

The more serious threat to Gill's identity is posed by Botsford, his editor and symbolic father. Botsford enters the scene with Gill's review "in his hand." Part of the review has been illegally "buried" and may subsequently be removed. This threat to Gill's writing is a disguised fear of castration because the writer identifies with his writing. The writer's identity, his name, is crucial to his potency. His name is the key to his ability to reproduce and promulgate himself. Yet, his name "looks as if it could stand some working on."

Gill recognizes then that his editorial parent may correct and improve his "piece," but the cost may be terrible, for the piece may be taken over by the authorities who control the emissions of his pen. Gill's image for what he has lost, the dolphin, thus becomes a rather blatant phallic symbol, reemerging as the pen (the grammatical penis) that the "dumb" writer loses. In other words, the writer must give up his "piece" to be published, to survive as a writer, but he is no longer intact as the writer.

We now may see the psychological fittingness of the error Miss Gould finds: It is a structure that is "dangling." The writer may see his own fate in the sentence that sticks out, for it has suddenly "assumed the female gender." The writer's castration anxiety emerges here: He has desired to please Miss Gould, but focusing on grammar and correctness will render him impotent and emasculated. Thus, Gill's story works to resolve his Oedipus complex by pointing out the advantages of accepting the values of the father (Botsford) and shifting his desire from Miss Gould to a more appropriate object: the reader. Gill evades symbolic castration. "The sentence stands," the father says, saving the writer's pen (us).

POLITICAL CRITICISM

Political criticism starts from the idea that the study of literature is not part of some ivory tower of learning, withdrawn from the real world. Rather, literary criticism is inevitably involved in politics—in shaping our understanding of the culture we inhabit, and the role that literature (including all sorts of texts) plays in altering or reinforcing values and beliefs. Even when literary critics argue that literary study should avoid political issues, focusing instead on the literature itself, they are taking a political position, as politically alert critics would say.

Political criticism can proceed from any number of positions—liberal, conservative, moderate; free-market capitalist, socialist, communist. The idea is simply that the reader brings a certain political stance to the text. Perhaps it can be argued that the text supports or opposes this political stance, or there is evidence that the author supported or opposed this stance, or the text somehow illuminates or obscures or otherwise influences our understanding of this political stance. Clearly, the most successful avowedly political criticism has been feminist criticism, which has transformed the study of literature in the modern era by bringing attention to how gender and sexuality
are represented. Feminist criticism has led to masculine studies, queer theory, gay and lesbian criticism, and a striking number of influential studies. But Marxist criticism, African American studies, Chicano studies, and Native American studies have also made significant contributions by foregrounding political concerns.

Any political orientation can drive a reading. Although the idea of left-handed criticism may seem silly, many cultures stigmatize left-handedness. Right means "correct" as well as the opposite of "left," while left in Latin is "sinister," which has come to mean "evil"; the Irish word ciotag, used for left-handed people, also means "a very strange person"; the Portuguese word for a left-handed person, canhoto, also referred to the devil at one time, and canhestro means "clumsy"; in Mandarin, the word for "left" also means "improper." In Norwegian, saying that something is left-handed work means that it was done poorly. Left-handed criticism, so far as I know, doesn't exist, but it could if readers were to identify representations of left-handedness, or other textual evidence that would illuminate how we see people who use the "other" hand.

In this text, I've elected to focus on feminist criticism to illustrate political approaches, while glancing at a few other political strategies. If you understand how to use feminist criticism, then you can easily make use of other political stances—if you understand the politics. If you don't know anything about Marxism or Native American issues, then of course you are unlikely to be able to make much use of these orientations.

Feminist criticism generally assumes, like reader-response criticism, that a literary work is shaped by our reading of it, and this reading is influenced by our own status, which includes significantly gender, or our attitude toward gender. But, as feminists point out, since the production and reception of literature have been controlled largely by men, the role of gender in reading and writing has been slighted. The interests and achievements of half of the human race have been neglected—or appreciated largely from only one sex's point of view.

You don't have to consider yourself a feminist to benefit from feminist criticism. Simply taking gender into account, regardless of your social and political views, is likely to open your eyes to important works, authors, and issues you would have missed otherwise.

Although it is difficult to generalize, given the diversity and development of feminist criticism in recent decades, particularly as postfeminism and queer theory have challenged the very terms of gender and sexuality, there are still some basic strategies you can adopt. You'll want to consider the significance of the gender of the author and the characters. You'll want to observe how sexual stereotypes might be reinforced or undermined in the work. How does the work reflect or alter or complicate the place of women (and men) in society? Perhaps most powerful, imagine yourself reading the work as a woman. If you happen to be female, this last suggestion may seem easy enough; but feminist critics point out that women have long been taught to read like men or to ignore their own gender. And postfeminist critics have challenged the idea that there is some particular thing that "as a woman" refers to. So, reading as a woman, even if you are a woman, may be easier said than done.

I developed the following feminist reading of Gill's passage simply by noticing references to gender and paying attention to any potential stereotypes.

**A Feminist Reading of the Gill Passage**

We know not all the writers at the New Yorker were men, even during the period Brendan Gill discusses in this passage from Here at "The New Yorker." "When he speaks of "some writer who has made a name for himself in the world," and about the editorial "machinery" that besets "him," Gill is of course referring to writers in the generic sense. Can one still assert today that "himself" and "him" in this passage include "herself" and "her"?

Such a claim, that one sexual marker includes its opposite, may seem absurd—as if "white" included "black" or "communist" included "democratic." But the motivations for such a claim are suggested even in this brief passage, for Gill's story not only contains this obvious bias in pronouns, still accepted by some editors and writers; the story also conveys more subtle messages about sexuality and sexual roles. For example, Miss Gould functions as a familiar stereotype: the finicky spinster, a Grammar Granny, who has devoted her life to "English grammar" and its enforcement. She is a copy editor, subservient to the male editor and writer, and her lack of imagination and taste, as Gill presents it, seem to testify to the wisdom of this power structure.

This division of labor—male/creative, female/menial—is subtly reinforced by the reference to the "hen-tracks" that cover the writer's galley. Poetry correction is the realm of the hen, the feminine. But these "hen-tracks" (they could not be rooster tracks) are more than aggravating correction; they come to threaten the writer's very identity. In attempting to produce "his copy," the writer is in a sense attempting to reproduce himself. The "glory of creation" is his literary procreation, and thus Miss Gould's effort to remove a particular sentence is a symbolic threat to cut off some more essential part of the writer. It is, after all, a "dangling modifier" that she has located; and this dangling structure is in danger of being fed to the "yawning pit," symbolic of the feminine editing and its excising dangers. Thus, men should fear women, the passage suggests. Do not give women power.

Because Gill's initial image for the writer starting out at the magazine, the dolphin in the sea, derives some of its power from the well-established association of the ocean and the womb, the images of the "yawning pit, not to mention the poisonous "mother's milk," become more telling. Even the error
itself is subtly connected to the feminine, for the problem with the sentence is that part of it has “assumed the female gender.” That part, in the context of nagging copy editors who chop up one’s prose, can only be a “complaint.”

The nonagenarian’s complaint itself seems significant: in the mode of feminine busybodies like Miss Gould, she laments not having “enough work to do.” Miss Gould, similarly overzealous, has herself done more work than is reasonable, and Botsford’s pronouncement that “The sentence stands” returns her to her place, negating her feminine fussiness.

**OTHER APPROACHES**

The feminist reading above does include some interest in money, class, and power, but these features could conceivably be brought to the forefront. Criticism that focuses on the economic and class structures involved in literature is sometimes called “Marxist” criticism, even if the critic does not endorse Marxism. Historical criticism might also be particularly attuned to representations of class and power.

If I were to add another chapter to this book, it might for example deal with ethical and religious criticism. These interests are arguably not prominent at the moment in literary studies, or they are embedded in other approaches, and so I have resisted enlarging what is supposed to be a brief introduction. But a critic interested in religious issues might wonder if the reference to “this tiny elect” in Gill’s passage signals the importance of religious values or their trivialization. Likewise, what does the reference to “oh, Christ!” tell us? Is Botsford a Christ figure, forgiving Gill for his sins? Indeed, is there a religious backdrop that makes this passage meaningful?

Certainly another chapter could be devoted to African-American criticism. Using that stance to think about this passage might start from the question of the role that race plays in it and indeed at the *New Yorker* of the time. At first glance, one might respond that race plays no discernible part in the passage. And that might be in fact quite to the point. Do any *New Yorker* advertisements from the 1970s feature African Americans? Do we assume that any of the characters in Gill’s tale are or even might be black? What difference does our assumption make? In this respect, one might suggest, the passage reads us, perhaps showing us some of our racially motivated assumptions. If you were to do a reader-response criticism of the passage, would your racial or ethnic status play any part in your reading?

In an ideal world, an introduction to writing about literature would include every identifiable approach. The goal of this introduction is necessarily more limited: using a sampling of the most visible approaches, it aims to show you how theory shapes practice—how assumptions stimulate and guide the process of developing critical essays. This goal is still an ambitious one but well worth your effort, providing a powerful passport to the various ways meaning is made, preparing you for these and other kinds of literary excursions. For the goal here is not an understanding of the maps and the travel guides and the stories that other travelers have told. It is, of course, your own rich and stimulating engagement with literature.

**Works Cited**


**Recommended Further Reading: Critical Worlds**


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