

Doing Literary Criticism

**Helping Students Engage
with Challenging Texts**

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Foreword by Leila Christenbury



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Introduction

One morning a few autumns ago, I was sitting at my school desk quickly scanning e-mail, savoring the still moments before the 7:30 bell would loose an avalanche of students into my classroom. One of the e-mail messages, I noticed, had been sent at 2 a.m. by one of my former students, now a freshman in college. I wondered what on earth Marjan might be sending me in the middle of the night. As it turned out, she had just finished her first college English paper at that late hour. And, she happily wanted me to know, for her approach in writing the essay, she used one of the critical lenses I had shared with her class the year before. She also attached a photo she'd taken of herself with her cell phone. Sitting at her computer—hair slightly disheveled, eyes looking tired, smile broad—Marjan was holding a fat packet. On the cover of the packet I could make out “Readings on Literary Criticism—Mr. Gillespie, Senior English.” This was a collection of materials I created to plop on my high school students’ desks every year.

Underneath her photo, Marjan had written “Lit Crit saved my skin tonight!” I had to chuckle.

For the last decade and a half, I’ve been experimenting with teaching literary criticism to high school students. I can’t claim “lit crit” will save anyone else’s skin, but I can attest to its potential for stretching students’ reading and thinking skills.

I began my venture into the wilds of literary criticism with a single Advanced Placement English Literature class in 1994. I thought I’d try introducing that particularly welcoming group of thirty go-getters to a handful of literary theories beyond the few approaches—biographical and formalist, for the most part—usually stressed in English classes and textbooks. In my own experience as a student, teacher, reader, and writer, I had found knowledge of different critical perspectives useful. I wondered whether a group of receptive, hardworking high school AP students might, too.

However, I quickly discovered there were precious few existing resources available to help me in this endeavor. Most of the AP materials were focused on prepping for the annual AP exam, complete with sample multiple-choice passages and canned essay strategies. This was not what I was seeking. I didn’t want to do test prep; rather, I wanted to teach literary criticism in a way that would benefit my students in their college careers, in their workplace occupations, and in their lives as

readers and citizens. So I needed to hunt elsewhere for resources. When I checked some of my old university textbooks on literary criticism and theory, they were so dense with technical jargon I didn't think they'd work for most high school students. This all meant, I realized, that I'd have to create my own literary criticism curriculum. I rolled up my sleeves and set about the task.

During that shakedown year, I collected materials, tested strategies, and worked to find an accessible critical language for my students. I am not inclined to lecture, so I created mini-essays on various critical approaches that the students could read on their own. My idea was to explain in a cogent way how different critical perspectives operate and then to have students try them out on whatever literature we were reading. We'd discuss the pros and cons of each approach, add that tool to our growing kit—or chuck it aside, as individual students saw fit—and move on to the next critical theory.

Many of my initial attempts to present these critical approaches were awkward, but in that particularly good-natured and responsive guinea pig class, the feedback I got from many of the students (though not all of them, of course) was that they found the emphasis on literary criticism generally fresh, intellectually engaging, and useful. Many of them said they appreciated having a vocabulary of criticism and multiple ways of approaching a text—enough that I became convinced of the value of the endeavor. The students embraced some approaches, resisted others, and discussed endlessly. When they walked out of my classroom that June, they took with them, I think, something beyond my fat packets: a growing confidence in their own reading and thinking skills.

This was my launch into literary criticism. I began this voyage with that single AP English Literature class, but I soon extended it to all of my English classes. In the years since, I've endlessly revised those mini-essays on various critical perspectives and tried different ways to vivify them with my students. After more than a decade of classroom experimentation, I have come to believe that we can make the field of literary criticism come alive. The discipline has great potential for expanding the repertoire of students' reading strategies and cultivating their independence as critical thinkers.

Defining Literary Criticism

When I began to consider that inaugural year how to present this field to my students, I realized I had to start with first things first: how to define it?

The phrase *literary criticism* can elicit groans because the word *criticism*, in ordinary, everyday use, has negative connotations. We usually think of a critic as a carping grump who seems to exist solely to find problems and stress faults.

So here's what I tell my students: the word has a better lineage than that. It comes from *kritikos*, a Greek verb meaning to make a discernment, to distinguish, decide, or judge. So a critic in the original sense—and in the sense we use the word in my classroom—is simply a person who expresses a reasoned opinion about the meaning, value, truth, beauty, or craft of something.

Critics surround us. We can watch film critics on TV; read theater, dance, or music criticism in our local daily newspaper; find video game reviews by technology critics in magazines; and watch sports critics argue for hours on cable sports channels. Although at times all these critics will make harsh judgments, they're also just as likely to praise and celebrate high-quality work in any of these human endeavors. Thus, when we talk about criticism, we're not talking solely about finding fault. We're talking about *critical thinking* in relation to cultural productions.

We need to get more specific, however.

Literary criticism is the discipline of *interpreting*, *analyzing*, and *evaluating* works of literature. *Literature* is most commonly defined as writing that has lasted because it deals with ideas of timeless and universal interest with noteworthy artistry and power, no matter whether the work is a poem, story, novel, play, essay, memoir, or something beyond category. (By the way, that common definition has provided grist for an uncommon amount of rich discussion in class some years. As one of my more vocal students put it to my bemusement, “Who decided that *Heart of Darkness* is of ‘universal interest’? I’m part of the universe, and I didn’t find it interesting *at all!*”)

When we *interpret* a work, we set forth one or more of its possible meanings. A lasting work of literature will often have multiple meanings, including meanings that the author intended to convey, meanings that readers have discovered over the years, and meanings that readers encountering the work find today. After we experience a work of literature like Edgar Allen Poe’s poem “The Raven,” for example, we may then ask ourselves, What was Poe trying to say in the poem? What does it say to me? What are some of the ways we might interpret that weird bird perched over the door? What are some other possible meanings? We also have opportunities to probe meanings beyond the boundaries of the page on which the poem is printed: What insights does the poem offer us into Poe’s psyche or the human psyche in general? Does the poem tell us anything about relations between men and women in Poe’s day? How about today? How might have interpretations of the poem changed over time? How does “The Raven” fit into the history of poetry in general—is it innovative, traditional, groundbreaking? Our discussions of meanings can meander in many directions. To paraphrase American literary scholar Northrop Frye, reading is like a potluck picnic to which the writer brings the words and the readers bring the meanings. Literary works speak to us in different ways, and one of the pleasures of talking about literature in school is the chance to check out all the different tastes and tasty dishes that different students bring to the picnic. This practice of *literary interpretation* has the larger aim of sharpening students’ critical reading skills.

When we *analyze* a work, we get under the hood to see how the engine works. Analysis is technical: pulling things apart, examining relationships among parts, mulling causes and effects. As poet John Ciardi explains it, when we analyze, we are not asking *what* a poem means anymore but *how* it means. We may ask ourselves, How did Poe make his poem “The Raven” so creepy? To answer, we might look at how the rhythm of the poem seems like an ominously ticking clock, or how the dark room in which the speaker mournfully sits is described, or how the final vowel sound in the refrain “Nevermore” makes a long, low sound, a deep “ohhhh” that punctuates the end of each stanza. An analysis is our diagnosis of the craft the author employs to cause our goose bumps. This practice of *literary analysis* has the larger aim of widening students’ knowledge of different writing strategies, moves, and possibilities.

Finally, when we *evaluate* a work, we form a personal judgment about its value. We may ask, Does “The Raven” grab me or bore me? Was I captured by the poem or just feeling trapped by having to read it? What value does it have? Is it a great poem or an overrated one? What does it add to the tradition of poetry? What does it add to the world? What value does any poem have in the world? And, always, we ask, Why? Because readers in a classroom have widely different preferences, opinions will differ wildly. Some may admire and enjoy the excellence of a work that causes a shiver of recognition or a click of insight, while others may deeply dislike the same work and feel only an impulse to roll their eyeballs in disdain. Seeking to celebrate and learn from differences in the ongoing classroom conversation about literature, students in my classroom are not obligated to agree with others’ judgments—even those of literary experts or their friendly teacher—about any given work of literature. They are only obligated to explain the reasoning and evidence that led to their judgments and to read and listen to others’ explanations for understanding as well as disagreement. Articulating their own evaluations and listening to their classmates, students often learn far more about a work than they might have learned curled up on a couch reading by themselves. *Literary evaluation* has the larger aim of honing students’ reasoning abilities.

Literary criticism is the traditional term for these ancient activities of interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating literature.

We also should probably nail down the meaning of the word *theory* as it is used in the field of literary criticism. In the past few decades, the word has been appropriated as a label for a specific set of beliefs. (See the chapter on postmodern criticism on the accompanying CD for more on that.) In more general usage, however, a literary theory is the specific viewpoint a critic or reader has staked out from which she or he interprets, analyzes, and assesses works of literature, and often the world.

For example, some critics value foremost the ways novels raise questions about history; we could call this a historical theory of reading literature. Other critics adopt a theory based in psychology, hoping to learn something from a story about the way people’s psyches tick or perhaps using a specific psychological perspective to shed



light on the story. Some readers seek moral instruction from literary works and others seek philosophical stimulation, while a political critic might be primarily interested in how works reinforce or subvert dominant ideologies of power. Many of these different reading approaches have been formalized over time into theories. Unlike in science, however, the theories of literary scholars are not subject to empirical tests, so we might think of them less as the findings of an experiment than as the lens through which the critic observes the object under study and conducts the experiment.

A lens, in fact, has proved a useful (if perhaps a bit tired) metaphor for discussing literary theories with students in my different classes. We find lenses in eyeglasses, microscopes, telescopes, and cameras, all with different powers. Lenses facilitate and influence the scope of our perception and comprehension; they can focus, sharpen, dull, deepen, magnify, shrink, draw closer, preserve, distort, or even shatter (as in the lens of a kaleidoscope) what we see. Each lens has distinct benefits and limits. For example, when we look through a telescope, we can bring some distant object much closer with greater detail, but with our eye glued to that eyepiece, gazing intently on one tiny circle of magnification, everything else is ignored. Or, for another example, when we tightly focus our camera lens, some part of the picture is brought into sharp contrast while other parts stay fuzzy, and much is left out of the frame of the final snapshot.

The same is true of literary lenses, or theories, which can also focus, sharpen, or distort what we read. Each approach provides a different way of seeing a literary work and of reading the world, and each has benefits and limitations. For example, when we look solely through the lens of historical criticism, we bring a novel's historical assumptions into close focus but set aside other possibilities for interpretation. Or when we become a formalist critic, reading closely to analyze in a technical way how a poem achieves its effects, we may miss the social and historical dimensions of the poem. As the eighteenth-century Irish writer Edmund Burke noted, any way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. Thus, every theory has its advantages and its drawbacks, and part of my motive in sharing multiple literary theories with my students is to adjust for any possible distortions of any one theory.

Operating by Three Principles

Since that first year's experiment, three general principles have guided my thinking about teaching literary criticism.

The first principle is that I want students to be doing literary criticism—hence, the active verb in the title of this book. “Lit crit” in high school curricula often means asking students to choose a work or author, to search the library or Internet, and ultimately to write some form of review or summary of selected existing critical

commentaries. Although such projects can offer a positive experience for students, reinforcing their research skills and giving them a chance to encounter a variety of critical viewpoints from different theoretical perspectives on a work of literature or an author, I do not want it to be the endpoint of their explorations. Reporting on others' analyses of works of literature is a starting point. Ultimately, I want my students to formulate their own analyses about what they are reading, to be producers of literary criticism rather than just consumers of it.

Prodding students to become independent literary critics has had plenty of classroom implications for me. Mostly I've had to downsize myself. To encourage students to cultivate their own critical powers and to trust their own analyses, I've had to back away from taking the final word, from being the Interpretive Big Cheese. I don't want to limit my students to thinking only about the questions I believe are important about a text. This means I have to remind myself that my job is to get my students to think for themselves, not to think like me. It also means I've had to learn to reinforce intellectual risk taking and tentativeness, which can be awkward and inconclusive and is particularly tough for some successful students who have been lavishly and justly reinforced over the years for learning well what is presented to them and mastering what others think. It means I have to remember that the goal of discussion in my classroom is not to come to an agreement about what a work of literature means but to consider the many possible meanings inherent in the interactions of texts and readers. It also means that I can't just hang a poster on the classroom wall of Ralph Waldo Emerson's severe mug over his comments about self-reliance ("Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string . . . believe your own thought . . . the integrity of your own mind") but that I have to try to live up to those ideals, avoiding in my own reading *CliffsNotes* and *SparkNotes* and all those canned curriculum resources—just as I ask my students to do—when encountering a new book.

My second principle is that students should be exposed to a variety of critical perspectives. As the German playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote in his diary in 1920, "A man with one theory is lost. He needs several of them, four, lots! He should be able to stuff them in his pockets like newspapers . . . you can live well surrounded by them, there are comfortable lodgings to be found *between the theories*" (Brecht 1979, 42).

The field of literary criticism can seem a quarrelsome discipline. In the public square of literary theories, provocative thinkers declaim from soapboxes on every corner. New Historicists bash New Critics who bash Traditionalists who bash Deconstructionists who deconstruct everyone's bashings. There's little in the discipline that isn't an occasion for vigorous arguing. Though these debates may seem endlessly circular to observers, I believe there is more than mere tail-chasing involved. Important, interesting, and thought-provoking issues can be at stake in these discussions. And students usually enjoy classroom debate if it's engaging and consequential. So my attitude is let them join the conversation.