

Specialized Approaches to Analyzing Literature

The preceding chapters describe strategies for interpreting literature, that draw mainly upon information in the works themselves. Other interpretive methods, however, often require specialized knowledge, knowledge that comes from disciplines such as linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, and psychology. Some of these approaches are more accessible than others, but all of them are based on principles that are provocative and that might help you interpret works as you read and study them. These approaches not only contain theories about what literature is and how one should study it, but they also state or imply concepts whose implications extend well beyond the study of literature. This chapter describes some of the best known of these specialized approaches and places them in a historical framework. If you are interested in following up on any of these approaches, each discussion includes a brief list of sources for further reading. An overview of critical and other theoretical approaches to literature is *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, third edition, edited by Wilfred L. Geerts, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). K. M. Newton's *Interpreting the Text: A Critical Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Literary Interpretation* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990) thoughtfully probes how twentieth-century critical approaches help readers interpret literature. Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) is a readable history of how critical approaches have affected the teaching of literature in the United States. Wendell V. Harris's *Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory* (New York: Greenwood, 1992)

and Frank Lentricchia's *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) provide definitions and brief discussions of theoretical concepts.

HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Two specialized approaches, historical and biographical criticism, emerged in the nineteenth century as a result of the widespread faith in science. Critics felt that they could understand literature best by studying the factual causes of the work: the social and cultural environment from which it came, the author's life, the author's intentions, the sources on which the work was based. They believed that their approach was "scientific" because they were dealing with objective reality—historically verifiable facts—and were using a scientific method for collecting such facts.

Historical criticism attempts to study literature by period and movement. This approach recognizes that literary phenomena—methods of composition, subject matter, and philosophical outlook—characterize various historical periods. Thus, the use of blank verse in plays characterizes the Shakespearean era; the use of heroic couplets, the Neoclassical era. An emphasis on free will characterizes the Romantic movement; a philosophy of determinism, the Realistic and Naturalistic movements. A focus on hedonistic self-indulgence distinguishes the 1920s; an attention to social conflict, the 1930s. The historical approach also assumes that literary periods and movements are dynamic. As one period reaches exhaustion, another period begins.

The historical approach has several goals: to study a work's relationship to its own and other periods, to learn more about a writer's culture, to place the work within an evolving tradition (such as the novel, Christian literature, allegory, political fiction, the epic), to compare it with the literature of other countries. The most important goal of historical criticism, however, is to illuminate the work. We know, for example, that Jack London read the most influential thinkers of his day, Darwin and Spencer; by studying their ideas, we understand better the philosophical implications of London's fiction. T. S. Eliot, like other poets of the early twentieth century, read the French Symbolist poets; by studying their poetry, we understand Eliot's methods better. John Steinbeck depicted the social dislocations of poor people in the 1930s, and by studying their problems and the social theories prominent then, we understand his themes better.

Undergraduate survey courses typically use a historical approach. They present a country's literature chronologically or thematically and show how authors exemplify their periods. The papers you write for

survey courses will often focus on the relationship between a work and its historical context. One way to generate interpretations for these courses is to apply definitions of social, intellectual, and literary trends to individual works—definitions of concepts such as romanticism, realism, neoclassicism, symbolism, the Renaissance, modernism, surrealism, Darwinism, imagism, and naturalism. The most obvious source of these definitions is your instructor, but you can also find good definitions in dictionaries of literary terms, literary histories, encyclopedias, history books, and other sources of background information. Another source of interpretations is comparisons—comparisons of works from different movements, comparisons of works from the same period. A third source is the cultural traits authors describe or draw upon for their themes. William Faulkner, for example, used the "Southern Myth" in his fiction—a nostalgic, glorified concept of Southern ideals and history that evolved before the Civil War and received acute enlargement afterward. Faulkner never says directly that he focuses on this myth, but by studying Southern history and observing the myth in other works, we can see that he does so, and thus we can understand better the unspoken, implied tensions in his work.

Two comprehensive examples of historical criticism are the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) edited by Emory Elliott and others, and *The Literary History of England*, second edition (New York: Appleton, 1967), edited by Albert C. Baugh and others. Two venerable works that attempt to establish the "spirit of the age" as background for understanding literature are E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Random House, 1943) and M. I. Finley's *The World of Odysseus* (New York: Penguin, 1954). E. D. Hirsch, Jr., in *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) argues that the best interpretation of works of literature must rest on ascertaining the authors' intentions. One does this by historical and biographical investigation. A fine historical treatment of a genre is Walter Allen's *The English Novel: A Short Critical History* (New York: Dutton, 1954).

BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

The *biographical approach* relates the author's life and thought to his or her works. Usually the author's life and thought are reflections of his or her time and are thus important aspects of the historical approach. Sometimes a writer may have been ahead of his or her time, or may even be unclassifiable. Or the writer may have been the predominant figure of the time. Or the writer's life may have been the major

source of his or her literary material. For whatever reason, a writer's life may shed light on his or her literature and the literature of the era.

The biographical approach has two major advantages. First, it helps to illuminate elements within a work—words, allusions to local and historical events, conflicts, themes, characters, and setting. Learning, for example, that F. Scott Fitzgerald had an ambivalent attitude toward people with great wealth prompts us to look for a similar ambivalence in his works. Second, works often take on an added significance when we see them as expressions of authors' deep concerns and conflicts. The more we empathize with a writer's problems, the more meaningful his or her works may seem to us. The more we know about the full historical and biographical context of a work's themes, the more relevant they may seem to all human experience.

Third, we can discover more about a work's meaning and importance by trying to understand the author's intentions and audience. Authors don't always state their intentions; even when they do, we may not interpret their works the way they intended. Knowing something about their intentions and the reactions they wanted to draw from their original audiences gives us at least a starting point for understanding their works, and sometimes we recover understandings of works that time has otherwise erased.

If you use the biographical approach, avoid two mistakes. First, avoid equating the work's contents with the author's life. They are not necessarily the same. No matter what the source of a work's material may be, it is a recreation of life, a stylization and alteration of it. Literature is "fictional." Some scholars argue that even nonfictional writings such as memoirs and autobiographies have a fictional quality. Second, avoid using unsound sources of information. Many biographies are highly speculative or contain erroneous information. Not until the twentieth century, for example, did we have a biography of Edgar Allan Poe that did not distort, sometimes grossly, the facts about his life.

Three fine and enjoyable examples of biographical criticism are K. J. Fielding's *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction* (Boston: Houghton, 1964), F. W. Dupee's *Henry James: His Life and Writings* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), and Arthur Mizener's *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Boston: Houghton, 1965).

SOCIAL CRITICISM

The economic theories of Karl Marx and the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud gave birth early in the twentieth century to three

critical approaches that were influential before World War II and that, with modifications, continue to be practiced today. They are social criticism, psychological criticism, and archetypal criticism.

Social criticism is similar to historical criticism in recognizing literature as a reflection of its environment. It would focus, for example, on the ways in which Jane Austen's novels depict the emphasis on decorum and etiquette by the English country gentry at the end of the eighteenth century. In recent times, especially between World War I and World War II, social criticism has described a particular kind of social reality and sometimes a particular economic and social theory. Social critics were most active in the 1930s during the Great Depression. They applauded literature that depicted the struggles of the poor and downtrodden, especially when they engaged in strikes against oppressive capitalist bosses. Examples of literature with such strong "proletarian" elements are the works of Carl Sandburg, Émile Zola, Maxim Gorky, Nikolai Gogol, Frank Norris, Charles Dickens, Richard Wright, John Steinbeck, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and James T. Farrell. The social critics usually approved of a socialist solution to the problems of the oppressed, and they sometimes judged the quality of works solely on the basis of their Marxist orientation. Partly because of this narrowness of focus and rigidity of standards, the social approach, as it was applied in the 1930s, has lost some of its appeal. It showed, however, that many works do reflect society in great detail, that they sometimes attempt to reform society, and that understanding them means, in part, grappling with the social issues they reflect. A well-known and thorough work of social criticism is Granville Hicks's *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War* (New York: Macmillan, 1935).

If the social approach seems relevant to works you want to write about, you should first define the social situations the works describe and identify the authors' attitudes toward them. Do the authors, for example, seem to have solutions in mind? Do they feel that society has to be the way they describe it? If you suspect that the authors depict a historical situation and you want to compare their treatment with the actual events, then you will need to seek reliable secondary sources. (Primary and secondary sources are discussed in Chapter 11.) If you want to argue that particular economic or social theories help to explain an author's social concerns in a work, you will need reliable explanations of those theories.

Since World War II, a new generation of Marxist critics has infused social criticism with renewed vigor. An example is the Hungarian critic Georg Lukacs, who argues that literature should reflect the real world.

Lukacs does not mean that literature should be a mirror image of society by, for example, giving detailed descriptions of its physical contents or its patterns of behavior. Rather, literature should represent the economic tensions in society as described in Marx's writings. Ironically, for Lukacs, works that give an accurate description of the real world may be less "real" than works that emphasize themes (ideas) over description. Lukacs believes that literature might even have to distort reality in order to represent the "truth" about society. To show the economic struggles caused by capitalism, for example, an author might have to create character types one would never meet in real life. Lukacs, therefore, prefers the novels of Balzac to those of Flaubert, because even though Balzac's plots and characters are less plausible than Flaubert's, Balzac reveals the economic pitfalls of capitalism as Marx saw them.

A general introduction to Marxist literary criticism is Peter Demetz's *Marx, Engels, and the Poets: Origins of Marxist Literary Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959). For a brief overview of contemporary Marxist criticism, see David Forgas's "Marxist Literary Theories" in *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, edited by Ann Jefferson and David Robey (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1982). A defense of the Marxist approach is Terry Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) surveys modern critical theory from a Marxist point of view.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Psychological criticism attempts to apply modern psychological theories to authors and their works. Because of his predominance in the field of psychology in the twentieth century, psychological criticism usually relies upon the complex and multiple theories of Sigmund Freud. Although not all of Freud's ideas relate to literature, many literary critics find three of them very attractive: the dominance of the unconscious mind over the conscious, the expression of the unconscious mind through symbols (most notably in dreams), and the primacy of sexuality as a motivating force in human behavior. These three ideas are related. Freud believed that sexual drives reside in the unconscious, that the conscious mind represses them, and that unconscious symbols usually represent this repressed sexual energy.

The earliest Freudian critics saw literature as a kind of "dream" and thus a source of insight into the authors themselves. Using works of liter-

ature as symbolic representations of an author's subconscious, Freudian critics would create a psychological portrait of the author. An example of this kind of psychobiography is Marie Bonaparte's *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (London: Imago Press, 1949). Early Freudian critics also used psychoanalytic principles to analyze characters in works of literature. They looked upon characters as having motivations, conflicts, desires, and inclinations similar to those of real people. They sought psychological clues to the makeup of literary characters, especially the unconscious symbolic expressions found in dreams and repeated patterns of behavior and speech. In Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, for example, whenever Mary Tyrone raises her hands to her hair, she unconsciously expresses anxiety about her wrecked youth, health, and innocence. Many authors purposely incorporated psychological theories into their works. Eugene O'Neill, D. H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, and Tennessee Williams, for example, were familiar with Freudian psychology. Some writers employed structural devices drawn from psychological theories. Examples are the *stream of consciousness* technique, which conforms to William James's ideas about the workings of the conscious mind; and the surrealist technique, which conforms to Freud's ideas about the undisciplined unconscious. Examples of stream-of-consciousness narration are James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*; T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. Examples of surrealism are Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and the fiction of Franz Kafka.

Many other works of literature were also rich fields for early psychological criticism, even though they may not have been directly influenced by psychological theories. Freudian critics were interested in any works that are themselves dreamlike, such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, or that contain accounts of characters' dreams, as do some of Dostoevsky's novels. Other works have appealed to psychological critics because of their heavy emphasis on complex or unusual characters.

Recent psychological critics continue to find in Freud's theories a rich source of ideas about literature, but whereas earlier critics focused on author and characters, recent critics have turned their attention to the relationship between text and reader. The critic Norman Holland, for example, argues that the text contains a secret expression of what the reader wants to hear. The reader is not consciously aware of this urge, but it is nonetheless the cause of his enjoyment of the work. The French critic Jacques Lacan holds that the structure and devices of

literature make it similar to the unconscious, which Lacan claims is a product of language and is structured like language.

One of the most influential works of early psychological criticism is Ernest Jones's *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York: Norton, 1949), in which Jones, a psychiatrist, argues that Hamlet's problems stem from Oedipal conflicts. An anthology of psychological criticism is *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983), edited by Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips. This collection opens with writings by Freud, and includes a sampling of Freudian critics from early to recent times, and gives examples of Freudian approaches to individual works of literature such as *Alice in Wonderland* and Kafka's fiction. *The Psychoanalytic Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), edited by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, features psychoanalytic readings of Edgar Allan Poe's detective story "The Purloined Letter." It includes an influential essay by Jacques Lacan as well as responses to Lacan's approach by other critics.

ARCHETYPAL CRITICISM

Archetypal criticism emerged from the theories of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. Jung accepted Freud's concept of the unconscious mind, but whereas Freud held that each person's unconscious is unique, Jung argued that a part of the unconscious is linked by historical associations and communal "memories" to the unconscious minds of all people. To represent this phenomenon, he coined the phrase "collective unconscious." He believed that certain human products and activities—myth, symbols, ritual, literature—reproduced these memories in the form of "archetypes." Jung defined an *archetype* as any figure or pattern that recurred in works of the imagination from generation to generation. Although there are many possible archetypes, they fall into three broad categories.

Archetypal Characters

The first category, characters, contains such figures as the hero, the rake, the scapegoat, the outcast, the hypersensitive youth, the earth mother, the martyr, the *femme fatale*, the rebel, the cruel stepmother, the saint, the "spiritual" woman, the tyrannical father, star-crossed lovers, and the ruler. The following are examples of literary treatments of some of these archetypes: the *femme fatale* (Shakespeare's *Antony*

and *Cleopatra*, Mérimée's *Carmen*, Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," Zola's *Nana*); the tyrannical father (Besier's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Longfellow's *Hiawatha*); the hero (Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*; the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Homer's *The Iliad*); the scapegoat (Jackson's "The Lottery," Melville's *Billy Budd*); the outcast (Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the Book of Job, Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott"); the rake (Byron's *Don Juan*, Richardson's *Clarissa*, Etheridge's *The Man of Mode*, Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," Wycherley's *The Country Wife*); and star-crossed lovers (Marlowe's "Hero and Leander," Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*).

Archetypal Situations

The second category, situations, includes the quest, the initiation, the journey, the fall, death and rebirth, and the task. Some works, like *Oedipus Rex*, contain more than one archetypal situation. Oedipus makes a "quest" for the truth about King Laius's murderer. He has already performed a task—solving the riddle of the Sphinx's—that saved the kingdom. When he achieves his quest, he suffers a catastrophic fall (from highest in the land to lowest). The quest is usually combined with a journey, as in the search for the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend, and often results in the initiation of a naïve, inexperienced protagonist into the hardship and complexity of life. Examples of works dealing with initiation are Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," Joyce's "Araby," Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, and Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. The death-rebirth archetype appears in myth and fantasy as the literal death and rebirth of a character—Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, for example—but in more realistic literature it often appears in connection with seasonal changes: fall (old age), winter (death), spring (rebirth), summer (life and fruition). In such works, seasonal changes emphasize the metaphorical death and rebirth of a character or place. For example, Émile Zola's *Germinal* concludes with spring, and the renewal of plant and animal life coincides with the end of the workers' strike. The mining town has "died" as an economic entity, but with the end of the strike it is reborn. Spring also represents the germination and growth of ideas that will lead to a better life for the workers. Often allied with the

death-rebirth situation is a descent into hell. In some works, such as Homer's *The Odyssey*, Virgil's *The Aeneid*, and Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, the protagonist literally descends into hell. But in works that shun fantasy, the journey is metaphorical and equivalent to a traversal of hell-like places (T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*) or to psychological states of deep despair. Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* emerges, at the end, from a psychological hell brought on by his cold-blooded murder of an innocent person. Tennessee Williams's play *Orpheus Descending* and Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* are conscious metaphorical uses of the journey-into-hell archetype.

Archetypal Symbols and Associations

The third category of archetypes is symbols and associations, many of which suggest polarities. Examples are light-darkness (light equals knowledge, hope, purity, spirituality; dark equals ignorance, despair, evil, bestiality), water-desert (water equals rebirth, life, creativity; desert equals spiritual and intellectual sterility, death), heights-depths (heights equal achievement, sublimity, heaven, revelation, purity; depths equal dejection, mystery, entrapment, hell, death), and the already mentioned spring-winter. One critic argues that the novels of Hemingway use the height-depth polarity: When Hemingway's characters occupy high places, things go well for them; when they descend to the lowlands, the fragile order of their world falls apart.

The Appeal of Archetypal Criticism

Jung's theories are controversial among psychologists, but they have attracted literary critics for several reasons. One is that remarkably similar patterns do exist from culture to culture. Early Christian missionaries, for example, encountered myths celebrating a martyred, resurrected hero who promised to return and bring a new, golden age. Such was the case when the Aztecs mistook Cortez for the god Quetzalcoatl. Another reason is Jung's contention that archetypes have a profound emotional and intellectual impact on people, that people unconsciously recognize them as being somehow profoundly meaningful. This theory helps critics explain, apart from aesthetics, the long-lasting appeal of such works as *Oedipus Rex*, the *Odyssey*, portions of the Bible, the Greek myths, and fairy tales. The archetypal approach also helps explain the appeal of art forms that lack high aesthetic quality—

but that are nonetheless very popular—such as American westerns, detective and spy stories, and soap operas. In fact, critics often use the archetypal approach to understand not just the literature of a culture but the culture itself. A culture's recurring emphasis on extensive travel, for example, might suggest restlessness and rootlessness. Patterns featuring strong, dominant females might suggest a diminished masculine role. Recurrent violence might indicate a lack of patience to solve complex problems peacefully and lastingly. Archetypal critics have made all of these points about American society.

Perhaps the most practical attraction of archetypal criticism is simply the recognition that patterns in literature do exist and recur; that they often give structure to a work, that many artists have used them in one way or another, and that, for whatever reason, they often deal with profound aspects of human experience. You don't have to believe in Jung's theories to use the archetypal approach to literature. You need only be alert to the possibility of recurring patterns and write about them if you find them meaningful.

Norman Friedman in Chapter 16 of *Form and Meaning in Fiction* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1975) provides thought-provoking descriptions of frequently used archetypal patterns. A work that thoroughly explores one archetype is Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon, 1949). Two controversial, but enjoyable, works of archetypal literary criticism by Leslie A. Fiedler are *Love and Death in the American Novel*, revised edition (New York: Stein, 1966) and *Not in Thunder: Essays on Myth and Literature* (New York: Stein, 1972). The most important spokesperson for archetypal criticism is Northrop Frye; see especially *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1964) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957).

NEW CRITICISM

In the United States perhaps the most influential movement in literary criticism since World War II has been New Criticism. Although New Criticism began well before World War II, with the criticism of T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, it received its fullest expression after the war by such critics as John Crowe Ransom, W. K. Wimsatt, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren. These and other New Critics published best-selling textbooks that established practical and easily understood ways of teaching and studying literature. These ways

prefer "difficult" works that contain apparently illogical and troubling material. They prefer works that stay away from social and historical subject matter and that deal rather with private, personal, and emotional experience. They prefer indirect representation—symbolism, metaphor, connotation—to realistic representation.

For an overview of New Criticism, see *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1982), edited by Ann Jefferson and David Robey. Two influential New Critical essays are "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy," both by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, contained in Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1954). A readable and stimulating work of New Criticism is Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 1947). See especially Chapter 1 ("The language of Paradox") and Chapter 11 ("The Heresy of Paraphrase").

STRUCTURALISM AND POST-STRUCTURALISM

Structuralism

Like New Criticism, *structuralism* denies the value of historical, social, and biographical information and concentrates on identifiable elements in works of literature. Unlike New Criticism, its theory and methodology are grounded in linguistics. Although some nineteenth-century thinkers anticipated structuralist principles, structuralism originated from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Early in the twentieth century, Saussure gave three innovative courses in linguistics. Because he left no notes on the content of these courses, his students pooled their notes and published a reconstruction of the courses called *Course in General Linguistics* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986; published originally in 1916). This work is the basis of Saussure's fame and provides the theoretical underpinning of both structuralism and post-structuralism.

Saussure made several points about the nature of language that have provided new pathways for studying literature. First, a language is a complete, self-contained system and deserves to be studied as such. Before Saussure, linguists studied the history of languages (how languages evolved and changed through time) and the differences among languages; for this kind of study, Saussure coined the word *diachronic* (literally "through time"). Saussure argued that, instead of its history,

continue to influence the study of literature in American higher education.

The term "New Criticism" comes from the title of a book published by John Crowe Ransom in 1941, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions). Ransom surveyed the work of recent ("new") critics and thereby made clear some of his own critical principles. Other critics who agreed with Ransom came to be called the New Critics. The New Critics break dramatically with the nineteenth-century emphasis on historical and biographical background. They hold that understanding and appreciating a work of literature need have little or no connection with the author's intention, with the author's life, or with the social and historical circumstances that may have influenced the author. Everything the reader needs to understand and appreciate a work is contained within the work itself.

The New Critics see their method as "scientific." The work is a self-contained phenomenon made up of "physical" qualities—language and literary conventions (rhyme, meter, alliteration, plot, point of view, and so forth). These qualities can be studied in the same way a geologist studies a rock formation or a physicist the fragmentation of light particles.

Some New Critics, like Cleanth Brooks, claim that the meaning contained in works of literature cannot be paraphrased, cannot be stated in a straightforward, "scientific" way. One can state what a work is "about" or summarize a work's themes, but a work's meaning is much more complex than such statements alone. Brooks argues that a work's complexity lies in its "irony" or paradoxes. A *paradox* is a statement that seems contradictory but is nonetheless true. Statements such as "the first shall be last" or "you must lose your life to gain it" are paradoxes. Brooks claims that good works of literature are filled with paradoxes, with apparently contradictory meanings. In William Wordsworth's poem "It Is a Beautiful Evening," for example, a child seems oblivious to the beauty of nature but is, paradoxically, more aware of it than anyone else. The young lovers in John Donne's poem "The Canonization" paradoxically discover that by rejecting life they capture the intensity of life.

The New Critics use their theories about literature to judge the quality of works of literature. A "good" work, they believe, should contain a network of paradoxes so complex that no mere summary of the work can do them justice; yet, a good work should also have unity. The author achieves this unity by balancing and harmonizing the conflicting ideas in the work. Everything in the work is meaningfully linked together. Because the New Critics favor complex—yet unified—works, they downgrade works that seem simple or seem to lack unity. They

linguists should study how a language functions in the present, how its parts interrelate to make up a whole system of communication. This kind of study Saussure called *synchronic* ("at the same time"). Second, Saussure claimed that a language is a system of signs. He defined a *sign* as consisting of a sound plus the thing the sound represents. He called the sound the *signifier* and the thing represented the *signified*. Third, Saussure said that the sounds that make up a language system are arbitrary. Any sound, it doesn't matter which one, could represent a given thing. The sound for the concept "tree" varies from language to language, yet users of each language know that the sound represents "tree." Fourth, any given language is self-contained. The signs that make up a language have no meaning outside the system of that language. Finally, Saussure distinguished between the whole system, which he called *langue* (French for "language"), and one person's use of the system, which he called *parole* (French for "word" or "speech"). *Langue* consists of everything that makes the system work, such as words, grammatical structures, and inflections. *Parole* consists of these same elements but with variations from user to user. Each speaker of a language uses the same system but does so in a slightly different way.

In the 1930s and 1940s, literary critics began applying Saussure's ideas and methods to the study of literature. This application has taken two different but often merging paths, literary criticism and cultural criticism. A term that describes both kinds of criticism is *semiotics*, the systematic study of signs. For most practical purposes, the terms *structuralism* and *semiotics* are synonymous.

Structuralist literary critics attempt to show that literature is a form of language or that it functions like language. These critics see the individual work of literature as similar to parole, and literary genres or literature in general as similar to langue. Just as linguists study instances of parole in order to understand langue, literary critics study works of literature in order to understand the system of signs that make up a genre or literature as a whole. They might study a Sherlock Holmes story in order to understand detective fiction, a specific poem in order to understand lyric poetry, a short story in order to understand narrative, a Shakespeare play in order to understand drama, a Louis L'Amour novel in order to understand westerns, or a James Bond novel in order to understand spy fiction.

One kind of structuralist literary criticism is *stylistics*, the study of the linguistic form of texts. Stylistics can deal with both prose and poetry, but it has dealt mainly with poetry, particularly with the qualities of language that distinguish poetry from prose. Some stylistic critics

claim that it is *only* qualities of language that distinguish poetry from prose. By analyzing individual poems, these critics attempt to identify those qualities.

Structuralists who study whole cultures attempt to understand a culture's sign systems. The most prominent practitioner of this kind of criticism is the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss claims that a culture is bound together by systems of signs and that these systems are like language. He uses Saussurian linguistics as a way of describing the "grammar" of these systems. All aspects of a culture—technology, religion, tools, industry, food, ornaments, rituals—form sign systems. The people of the culture are unaware of these systems, so the structural anthropologist's task is to bring them to light. Lévi-Strauss is perhaps best known for his study of myth. He examines multiple versions of single myths in order to isolate their essential structural units. Although Lévi-Strauss applies his theories to the study of tribal cultures, other critics, like the Frenchman Roland Barthes, use Lévi-Strauss's approach to "psychoanalyze" modern society. They look for the unconscious sign systems that underlie all aspects of Western culture, including foods, furniture, cars, buildings, clothing fashions, business, advertising, and popular entertainment.

Structuralist analysis of culture and literature often merge, because literature can be considered an artifact of culture. Literature is a system of signs that can be studied for itself or for its place in a given culture. As a result, structuralist critics often shy away from complex and classic works and focus instead on popular literature. The Italian critic Umberto Eco writes essays on spy thrillers and the comic book story of Superman. He has even written a "semiotic" detective novel, *The Name of the Rose* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983). Structuralist critics also are usually more interested in fitting a work within a culture or a tradition than in understanding the work itself.

For an introduction to structuralism, see Leonard Orr's *Semiotic and Structuralist Analyses of Fiction: An Introduction and a Survey of Applications* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1987). Orr describes structuralist theory, then provides an annotated bibliography of important works of structuralist criticism. A clear and readable book-length treatment is Robert Scholes's *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974). Tzvetan Todorov's "The Grammar of Narrative" in *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977) equates narrative structure to sentence structure. Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979) includes essays on Superman and James Bond. A collection of stylistic studies is *Linguistics and Literary Style*, edited by Donald C. Freeman

(New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970); see, for example, J. M. Sinclair's "Taking a Poem to Pieces."

Post-Structuralism

Post-structuralism evolved from Saussure's theories of language. It accepts Saussure's analysis of language and uses his methodology to examine the language of literary works, but it concerns itself with the relationship between language and meaning. Post-structuralism, in fact, offers a radical theory of reading that rejects the certainty of meaning altogether. The most influential post-structuralist critic is the Frenchman Jacques Derrida.

The basis of Derrida's radical skepticism is Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified. Theorists of language have long maintained that words (signifiers) represent identifiable objects (the signified). The word "tree" represents the object "tree." But Saussure questioned the pervasiveness of such one-to-one correspondences. Words, he said, usually refer not to objects but to "concepts," which are expressed by other words. It seems possible, then, that language, or at least parts of language, may not refer to anything in the sensuously apprehendable world. Saussure said that language is a self-contained system and that in order to function it does not need to reflect reality, it needs only to reflect itself. Signs gain meaning from other signs in the system, not necessarily from the real world.

Derrida and other post-structuralist critics conclude from Saussure's theories that there is a "gap" between signifier and signified. This gap blurs the meaning of the signifier so that we cannot know exactly what it refers to. The resulting ambiguity is multiplied by the connection of signifier to signifier in an endless chain, no part of which touches the real world. A literary text is equivalent to just such a chain. It is a self-contained system that exists independently of the real world. As we read, we absorb this system with our consciousness, which Derrida maintains is itself made up of language. Reading is the confrontation of one language system (our consciousness) with another (the text). Recovering meaning from texts, then, is impossible, because interpretations of a text never point to the real world but only to more language. Our interaction with the text makes us *think* we are moving toward meaning, but we never get there.

The purpose of post-structuralist criticism is to expose the meaninglessness of texts. Derrida calls his critical method *deconstruction*. To "deconstruct" a work, the critic analyzes the text, especially its lan-

guage, to show that whatever connection may seem to exist between the text and the real world is an illusion created by the author's clever manipulation of language. The critic attempts to show that whatever the author may intend for the work to mean or whatever a reader may think it means is always undercut by the ambiguity of the work's language. The gap between signifier and signified is symptomatic of a "space" of emptiness, nothingness, non-meaning that lies at the heart of every text. The presence of this space, the critic tries to show, makes the text an "abyss" of limitless and contradictory meanings.

Post-structuralist criticism is not very reassuring for someone who wants to understand a work better. However, it does reveal, through the application of a rigorous and sophisticated method of analysis, the complexity of literature; and post-structuralist skepticism about meaning points to the mysteriousness of art—the inexplicable something in art that grips our imagination.

A brief explanation of both structuralism and post-structuralism is Ann Jefferson's "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1982). More thorough are several chapters on post-structuralism in Art Berman's *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988). A clearly written book-length study is Christopher Norris's *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (New York: Methuen, 1982). Norris discusses structuralism, New Criticism, Marxist and psychoanalytic criticism, and philosophical influences on post-structuralism.

READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

Reader-response criticism studies the interaction of reader with text. Reader-response critics hold that the text is incomplete until it is read. Each reader brings something to the text that completes it and that makes each reading different. Reader-response critics vary on what that "something" is. Recent psychoanalytic critics, such as Jacques Lacan and Norman Holland, say that the something is the unconscious. Post-structuralist critics say that it is the "language" that makes up the conscious mind. Marxist critics say that it is the economic ideology of the dominant culture. Critics interested in the relationship of culture and literature say that it is a whole way of looking at the world, absorbed from the reader's cultural environment. Whatever readers bring to the text, the text has no life of its own without the reader.

Of all the post-World War II movements in literary criticism, reader-response criticism perhaps most successfully challenges the dominance of New Criticism in the university classroom. It borrows methodology from New Criticism, structuralism, and post-structuralism, but rejects their contention that the work must be studied in isolation from its context. Context—historical, biographical, cultural, psychoanalytic—is relevant to the understanding of the text. Reader-response criticism, furthermore, rejects the post-structuralist claim that texts are meaningless. Texts may be incomplete in themselves, but the reading of them makes them potentially reflective of the real world—or at least the reader's experience of the real world.

Some reader-response critics, most notably the German critic Wolfgang Iser, agree with Derrida that works contain "gaps"—not necessarily because of the slippage between signifier and signified but because of the incompleteness of works. Authors always leave something unsaid or unexplained and thus invite readers to fill the resulting spaces with their own imaginative constructs. Iser argues, therefore, that many equally valid interpretations of a work are possible. Interpretations of a work will vary from person to person and even from reading to reading. Critics who agree with Iser often attempt to study how readers fill the gaps in works. These critics are more interested in mapping the process of reading than in explaining individual works.

Perhaps the most prominent group of reader-response critics focuses on how biographical and cultural contexts influence the interpretation of texts. These critics argue that reading is a collective enterprise. The American critic Stanley Fish says that a reader's understanding of what "literature" is and what works of literature mean is formed by "interpretive communities"—groups to which the reader belongs. These groups could be very small (a circle of friends) or very large (a region, country, or cultural entity like "Western civilization"). Fish rejects the idea that a text has a core of meaning that everyone in any age would agree upon. Rather, any shared understanding of a text's meaning comes from the beliefs of a community of readers, not from the text. Each reader's preconceptions actually "create" the text. If, for example, a reader believes that a miscellaneous collection of words is a religious poem, the reader will perceive it as a religious poem. If a reader believes that the work will fit a particular theory, the reader will find facts in the work to support the theory. The theory, in a sense, "creates" the facts.

Because of the influence and provocative nature of reader-response criticism, writings about it abound. *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, edited by Susan R. Suleiman

and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) provides an introduction to reader-response criticism as well as readings from prominent critics. Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) is a collection of lively and sometimes funny essays.

NEW HISTORICIST CRITICISM

New Historicism emerged in the late 1970s as a "new" way to use history to understand and evaluate works of literature. It shares "old" historicism's belief that the historical culture from which a work comes helps us understand the work. It drastically differs from the older historicism in its beliefs about the nature of literature, the nature of history, the ability of people to perceive "reality," and the purpose of literary studies. Its sympathy for disadvantaged or "marginalized" peoples gives it a political slant lacking in older historicism. This sympathy, along with its other beliefs and methods, has profoundly influenced other, more narrowly focused theoretical approaches such as feminist, Marxist, and ethnic criticism. Its breadth of inclusion has made New Historicism highly visible today in the teaching and study of literature. The term *New Historicism* applies to the American version of "cultural studies." The British version is called *Cultural Materialism*. Although Cultural Materialism is more overtly Marxist than New Historicism, both are heavily influenced by the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault.

The key assumptions of New Historicism are embedded in its understanding of several related concepts: culture, text, discourse, ideology, the self, and history. These concepts, in turn, establish the New Historicist approach to the study of literature. Although some of these terms surface in the older historicism, New Historicists reconstrue them according to structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language. The first term, culture, is probably the most important. In an anthropological sense, "culture" is the total way of life of a particular society—its language, economy, art, religion, and attachment to a location. This way of life is the "tradition" of a culture, handed down from generation to generation, that marks its uniqueness, its distinctness from other cultures. For structuralists, however, and for New Historicists—culture is also a collection of codes that everyone in a society shares and that allows them to communicate, create artifacts, and act. These codes include not just language, the most obvious cultural

"code," but every element of a culture—literature, dress, food, ritual, and games.

Because culture is made up of sign systems, it is also "textual." A text traditionally defined, is a written document containing a symbolic system (words, mathematical symbols, images, musical notation). The structuralists, however, expand "text" to mean any system of codes. The post-structuralists go further by claiming that because everything we know is filtered through "language," *everything* is text. "There is nothing outside the text," Derrida says. New Historicists accept the structuralist concept of text but reject the post-structuralist concept. They argue that all aspects of culture are "texts" open to interpretation in the same way works of literature are. They agree with the post-structuralists that human thought is like language, but they disagree that thought can have no connection to reality outside the mind (outside language). Yes, cultures create "texts" and "discourses" and "ideologies" that influence people, but people can become aware of the falseness and incompleteness of those structures.

At first glance, the term *discourse* seems similar in meaning to text. *Discourse* is commonly used to mean a verbal exchange of ideas. The structuralists expand its meaning to mean any system of signs, whether verbal or nonverbal. "Discourse," then, is analogous to language (Sausure's *langue*) and "text" to specific uses of language (*parole*). Foucault claims that groups of people, such as doctors, lawyers, priests, and sports players, create their own discourses. People in groups use discourses to communicate with one another and to distinguish their groups from other groups. Each discourse, Foucault says, has its own "discursive practice" that makes it different from other discourses. These practices include such things as word choice, sentence structure, bodily movements, prejudices, rhetorical forms, and "rules" about where and when to use the discourse. Foucault claims that discourses always arise from historical situations and usually have "political" implications. People with power—social, economic, political, or artistic—use discourses to manipulate other people and maintain their own power.

Both texts and discourses help establish and communicate ideology. *Ideology* is a system of beliefs that governs a group's actions, its view of reality, and its assumptions about what is "normal" and "natural." It is communicated by discourse and represented by cultural texts, including literary texts. New Historicists typically see ideology in political terms. One group of people unfairly imposes its ideology upon others, devaluing and exploiting those who fail to fit its definitions of the "normal" and "natural." These groups are either people within a society—wealthy people, politicians, white people, males, Protestants—

or they are whole societies, such as countries that colonize and impose their ideology upon other regions. Ideology, the New Historicists claim, covers up and ignores the aspects of reality that inevitably contradict the ideology. "Bourgeois" ideology, for example, hides the inequities of race, class, and gender that supposedly allow some people to exercise power over others. When an ideology becomes so pervasive that most people are unaware of its influence, it is said to be "hegemonic." At that extent of influence, people, especially those to whom the ideology gives advantage, assume that it represents the way things really are. However, no ideology is comprehensive enough to extend fair and equal treatment to all people. As a result, some people are "marginalized" and made vulnerable to exploitation.

If texts, discourse, and ideology are so dominant in society, how does the individual, the "self," fit in? Old historicists see the *self* as clear-sighted, autonomous, and self-directed. According to them, the self can make "objective" judgments about culture and history. New Historicists, however, see the self as much more limited in its ability to see reality and much more controlled by cultural codes. The self, they claim, is a "subject." Like the subject of a sentence, it performs actions and relates to "objects" (physical things, other people, literary texts). The self can also be a passive, rather than active, subject. It is "subject to" culture, to discourse, and to ideology in the same way that someone is "subject" to a law or a ruler. Because the self is so formed by its culture, it usually lacks the intellectual strength to see the inadequacies of dominant ideologies and discourses.

For this reason, people's ability to understand history is limited. Although *history* is the study and recounting of the past, people always see it through the lens of their own culture and their own "subjective" concerns. Any attempt, Foucault maintains, to tell a coherent story of historical events will fail. Historians can never know with certainty which events caused other events or which events are important. Rather, history is filled with inconsistencies, irregularities, and singularities that resist rational understanding. Events that are "trivial" from one person's point of view may be consequential to someone living at a different time or place. Historical narratives have political implications, Foucault says, because dominant groups create "official" histories, such as those taught in school and recounted in textbooks, to enhance their power. Dominant groups like to fabricate historical narratives that feature them as the engines of progress. But, according to Foucault, there is no such thing as "progress."

The New Historicist approach to literary study emerges from all of these concepts. Its beliefs about three things—literature, the author,

and the reader—help distinguish it from other theoretical approaches. For other critics, such as traditional historicists, *literature* is a “work,” not simply a “text.” To them, a “work” is self-contained, complete, and coherent. It is different from other forms of written communication because it is “beautiful,” it gives pleasure. Some works are finer than others and thus belong in a “canon” of great works that deserve appreciation and study. The work of literature, in short, becomes something like an icon, a mysterious, even spiritual, object that will stand the test of time. To old historicists, an *author*, especially of a great work of literature, is a “genius” who, although influenced by culture, transcends it. Authors intentionally craft works to convey certain ideas and create certain effects which can be understood and felt many years, even centuries, after the works were composed. A *reader* of literature, according to the old historicists, can respond spontaneously to the innate “beauty” of a work and can also use reason to discern how authors created their effects and what meanings they intended to convey.

New Historicists, in contrast, claim that *literature* is merely a “text” indistinguishable in nature from all the other texts that constitute a culture. They believe that there is really no such thing as “literature,” at least as a discourse that transcends culture and time. Rather, literature is “socially constructed”; every society decides what “literature” is and what its conventions are, and these definitions always vary from society to society and age to age. Definitions of literature are, therefore, highly arbitrary. No one definition is better than any other, no single culture’s concept of literature (or any art form) is better than that of other cultures. Equally relative are all judgments about literary value or merit. No author’s works are better than those of other authors, no single work is better than others, no one culture’s works are better than those of other cultures. All attempts to establish a “canon” of great works are inadequate, because they fail to take into account the complexity of cultural values. Rather, *all* texts, literary and otherwise (including “popular” texts such as films, television shows, advertisements, drugstore romances, westerns, and spy fiction), are worthy of study.

The *author*, for the New Historicists, is far less noble and autonomous than in other approaches. Like everyone else, authors are “subjects” manufactured by culture. A culture “writes” an author who, in turn, transcribes cultural codes and discourses into literary texts. Authors’ “intentions” about the form and meaning of their work are largely unconscious or, at least, merely reflections of cultural codes and values. In addition, the *reader* is as passive as the author; culture “programs”

readers to respond to its codes and forms of discourse. When readers read works of literature, they automatically respond to the codes embodied by them, just as they would to the codes in “non-literary” texts.

Not all New Historicists are so deterministic and relativistic as this description would indicate. There are those who reject Foucault’s pessimism about a person’s ability to understand historical reality, to read texts objectively, and to make changes in society. However, New Historicists do tend to share beliefs about the purposes of literary study. First, they believe that literature must be studied within a cultural context. Old-style historicists see historical facts mainly as a means to clarify ideas, allusions, language, and details in literature. New Historicists believe that literature *is* history; it refers to, and is “enmeshed,” in history. When New Historicists study literature, they examine such things as how the work was composed, what the author’s intentions were, what events and ideas the work refers to, how readers have responded to the work, and what the work means for people today. They draw upon many disciplines—anthropology, sociology, law, psychology, history—to show what role literature has played in history, from the author’s time to the present. Second, New Historicists focus on literature as cultural text. They study the relationship between literature and other texts, including nonliterary and popular texts. They identify the codes that constitute literary discourse and ascertain how people use literary discourse to communicate with one another and to comment on society. Third, New Historicists scrutinize the relationship of literature to the power structures of society. They want to show how literature serves, opposes, and changes the wishes of people in power and therefore what ideologies literature supports or undermines. Finally, many New Historicists see criticism itself as an “intervention” in society. By marking literature’s cultural roles, its ideologies, its effects, and the biases readers have brought to it, New Historicists aspire to diminish the injustices of race, class, and gender.

Since New Historicism is a fairly new critical approach to literature, its concepts and methods continue to evolve. Some general studies include Jerome McGann’s *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), Wesley Morris’s *Toward a New Historicism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972), and Harold Veese’s *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Some of the best-known New Historicist criticism has focused on Renaissance literature, such as *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester UP, 1985), edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, and Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance*

Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Of special note in Dollimore's collection is Paul E. Brown's "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine": *The Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism," which sees *The Tempest* as a reflection of colonialist malpractices. *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1986) edited by Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen deals with famous works of American literature. In *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), Edward Said offers a "postcolonial" version of New Historicism. He argues that Western culture has fabricated a distorted and unfair discourse about the East, manifested in countless works of literature and popular culture. Another postcolonial author is the Nigerian Chinua Achebe, who eloquently attacks the racism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," collected in Achebe's *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990). Books expounding the New Historicist approach to popular culture are John Fiske's *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin, 1989) and *Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History* (New York: Methuen, 1986), edited by Peter Humm, Paul Stigant, and Peter Widdowson. As for Michel Foucault, many of his works are excerpted in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), edited by Paul Rabinow. James Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) is a well-respected recent biography. David R. Shumway's *Michel Foucault* (Boston: Twayne, 1989) and Lois McNay's *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 1994) are succinct critical overviews of Foucault's work and thought.

FEMINIST AND GENDER CRITICISM

Feminist and gender criticism have much in common with reader response and New Historicist criticism, especially with critics who like Stanley Fish, believe that interpretations of literature are influenced by communities of readers. With the rise of feminism in the 1950s and 1960s, feminist critics claimed that, over the years, men had controlled the most influential interpretive communities. Men decided which conventions made up "literature" and judged the quality of works. Men wrote the literary histories and drew up the lists of "great" works—the literary canon. Because works by and about women were left out of the canon, women authors were ignored, and women characters were misconstrued.

Since the 1960s, feminist literary critics have successfully challenged these circumstances. Far more women now teach, interpret, evaluate, and theorize about literature than ever before. Previously neglected works such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), and Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron-Mills* (1861) are now widely read. Certain literary genres practiced by women, such as diaries, journals, and letters, have gained more respect. Numerous anthologies, literary histories, and interpretive studies explore women's contributions to literature. Recently, however, a new movement, "gender studies," has evolved out of feminist studies in order to address broader issues, notably the nature of both femininity and masculinity, the differences within each sex, and the literary treatment of men and homosexuals. Gender studies "complicates" feminist studies because, although they share many interests, they are not exactly the same. Both, however, are political in that they argue for the fair representation and treatment of people of all "genders."

A survey of the history of feminist and gender criticism helps spotlight their concerns. The first stage of feminist criticism began with two influential books, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1954), originally published in France in 1949) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970). Both authors criticized the distorted representation of women by well-known male authors. Their work laid the foundation for the most prevalent approach of this stage, the "images of women" approach. Following de Beauvoir and Millet, feminist critics called attention to the unjust, distorted, and limited representation of ("images" of) females in works of literature, especially works by men. They celebrated realistic representations of women and brought to light neglected works by and about women. They sought to expose the "politics" of self-interest that led people to create stereotypical and false images of women.

In the second stage of feminist criticism, beginning in the early 1970s, critics shifted away from works by males to concentrate on works by females. Elaine Showalter, a prominent critic from this period, called this approach "gynocriticism." Especially influential was the work of French critics such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous. Their criticism, called *écriture féminine* (female writing), argued for an "essential" (biological, genetic, psychological) difference between men and women that causes women to think and write differently from men. Gynocritics urged women to become familiar with female authors and to discover their own female "language," a language that supposedly enters the subconscious before the "patriarchal"

language of the dominant culture. They tried to delineate a female poetics, a use of literary conventions and genres that seems typically "female." Some critics based feminist poetics on the possible connection between writing and the female body. Because women's bodies have more fluids than men's, they argued, female writing is more "fluid." It is less structured, less unified, more inclusive of many points of view, less given to neat endings, and more open to fantasy than writing by males. It rejects or undermines the "marriage plot" and the "happy ending," in which a strong female protagonist "capitulates" to a man by marrying him. It seeks to understand why women authors seem to favor certain genres (lyric poetry, novel, short story, tale, letters, diaries, memoirs) over others (epic, romance, drama, satire).

The third stage of feminist criticism rebelled against the "essentialist" assumptions of gynocriticism and is closely allied with New Historicism in its focus on the cultural creation of identity. Gayle Rubin, in two influential essays—"The Traffic in Women" (*Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review, 1975) edited by Rayna R. Reiter and "Thinking Sex" *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (New York: Pandora, 1992, originally published in 1984) edited by Carole S. Vance—distinguishes between "sex" and "gender." Whereas sex is the biological difference between males and females, gender is the cultural difference. Culture determines the traits and behavior that set masculinity apart from femininity and rules on "normal" and "natural" gender distinctions. Western culture, for example, has seen women as passive rather than active, irrational rather than rational, subjective rather than objective, at home rather than at work, spiritual rather than material, and impractical rather than practical. It has ruled that certain kinds of behavior are "abnormal" and "unnatural" for females to practice, such as pursuing careers, doing construction work, being pastors or priests, wearing "male" clothes, or being assertive. Such gender distinctions, feminist critics claim, are arbitrary and almost always give women less power, status, and respect than men. In one sense, the feminist focus on gender is deterministic: Many women are "trapped" by the gender traits assigned to them by culture. In another sense, however, it offers hope. Culture, unlike biology, can be changed—through education, social action, and politics.

All three of these "stages" of feminist criticism have overlapped and coexisted. They continue to be practiced. But the focus on gender in the third stage led not only to a new stage of feminist criticism, it also helped to establish the broader movement of gender criticism. Until the mid-1980s, many feminist critics assumed that all women were basically

the same in their biological nature, their gender traits, their shared history of oppression, and their aspirations. Most feminist critics, furthermore, wrote from the perspective of an elite group of people: Women who were white, Western, politically liberal, middle-class, and highly educated. Beginning around 1985, some feminist critics challenged these assumptions and this perspective. Feminist critics, they said, should look at the many ways in which women are different from one another. Factors other than gender, they said, give females identity, factors such as race, ethnic background, class status, and economic circumstances. These critics began studying the literary representation of women in minority cultures, in non-Western cultures, at various economic levels, and in different work situations. They began examining ways females themselves marginalize or "erase" other females. Perhaps most important, they began to pay attention to sex and gender differences among women, especially between heterosexuals and homosexuals.

Gender criticism, perhaps because it is so new, remains a nebulous, difficult-to-define approach to the study of literature. It covers almost anything having to do with "gender," including feminist criticism, theories of cultural influence, and crimes such as sexual abuse. One of the most important aspects of gender criticism is its exploration of the literary treatment of homosexuality. As with New Historicism, the theorist who most influences gender studies is Michel Foucault. The first volume of his three-volume study, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1980; originally published in France in 1976), states his basic ideas about sexuality. The Western concept of "sexuality," Foucault maintains, is not a universal category but was invented in the late nineteenth century. Before then, there was no distinction between "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" in terms of gender preference. Although same-sex relationships occurred before that time, there was no concept of homosexuality as a "lifestyle" behavior. Modern Western views of sexuality constitute an "ideology" that benefits people in power, most notably bourgeois capitalists. This ideology, as with all ideologies, is manifested in discourses such as religion, science, politics, medicine, and literature. Although Foucault was himself apolitical, he was deeply sympathetic to "marginalized" people. He struggled with his own identity as a homosexual and felt personally marginalized. He attempted suicide in 1948 and died as the result of an AIDS-related illness in 1984.

Some gender critics disagree with Foucault's heavy emphasis on cultural determinism. They believe that sexual identity, including homosexuality, results from biological rather than cultural causes. Gay criticism (which deals with men) and lesbian criticism (which deals

with women) share certain goals, primarily the struggle to eliminate homophobia. They call into question the Western assumption that heterosexuality is the only "natural" sexual identity and attempt to expose the politics of gender—how certain groups manipulate concepts of sex and gender for their own benefit. Gay and lesbian critics analyze all discourses, including literature, that reinforce or destabilize conventional concepts of sex and gender. They study the works and lives of authors who were admitted homosexuals and bisexuals or who seemed to have suppressed homosexual tendencies.

Perhaps the best place to begin reading feminist criticism is with an anthology of essays such as *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), edited by Elaine Showalter. Showalter provides an introduction to feminist criticism as well as essays by other critics. Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, mentioned above, are among the best examples of "images of women" criticism. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, 1957; originally published in 1929) and Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (originally published in English in *Signs* 1 [1976]: 875-94 but much anthologized) are well-known examples of gynocriticism. Gayle Rubin's essays, mentioned above, and Elaine Showalter's edited collection, *Speaking of Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1989), represent the shift of interest toward gender. Two texts that deal with the broadening of feminist criticism are Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" in Showalter, *New Feminist Criticism*, (originally published in 1975) and *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), edited by Joanne Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin. *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), edited by Claude J. Summers, is an excellent one-volume encyclopedia featuring articles on authors, terms, and theoretical approaches. *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), edited by Henry Abelove, et al., is an anthology of essays. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) deals with heterosexuality and homosexuality in literature before the twentieth century. For works by and about Michel Foucault, see the discussion of New Historicism.

PART TWO

Writing about Literature