

## A Field Guide: Specialized Critical Approaches to Literature

Timothy L. Pagaard

I have stressed in this course that the purpose of all criticism is to interpret literature in such a way that readers can return to it with greater understanding and therefore with greater enjoyment. Considering the infinite variety of human world-views, you will not be surprised to discover that opinions differ radically as to which is the best interpretive method.

The twentieth century saw many literary scholars going to extremes, short-sightedly committing to various narrow theoretical approaches to the exclusion of all others, even at the expense of literature itself—the object of criticism in the first place—which they frequently relegated to secondary status. Harold Bloom refers to many in his profession as “a rabblement of lemmings.” One interpretive fad after another has arisen loudly and violently to eclipse the others. Applied exclusively any of these theories can render embarrassingly silly results—and you have no idea how silly some of these results have been!

But I have also stressed that as scholars we must be opportunistic: We must exploit any approach we can find, wherever we might find it, if the result is an enhanced understanding of the meaning of a given piece of literature. The wisest critics today regard the full range of theoretical approaches as a menu of potentially useful alternatives. Consider the following examples of the most prominent critical approaches applied to Flannery O’Connor’s fiction.

Further, as you research the opinions of others, you must be prepared to recognize these specialized approaches. Unless you had heard of *structuralism*, *new historicism*, or *Freudian criticism*, you might be baffled by an essay analyzing O’Connor’s stories in terms of “semiotics,” another suggesting that her elitist biases render “The Displaced Person” a piece of propaganda for the forces of oppression, or another asserting that “Good Country People” documents her dysfunctional relationship with her mother.

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### HISTORICAL CRITICISM

**The theory:** Historical criticism (1) examines the *social and cultural environment* from which a work of literature emerged and (2) places the work in a *literary historical context*, comparing it with literature from other eras and sometimes other cultures. The historical critic considers herself or himself a “historian of literary taste,” frequently examining the influences of previous literature on a particular writer or text.

**Example:** Flannery O’Connor’s stories “Revelation” and “The Artificial Nigger” explore the motivations behind racism in mid-twentieth century. A historical critic might study the social and economic realities giving rise to these motivations. The critic might also show how O’Connor’s work fits into the Southern literary tradition, responding to and building upon earlier treatments of race, notably Faulkner’s.

**Disadvantage:** Sometimes the complex connections a critic develops are fascinating but distract from the meaning of the literature itself.

**Key players:** Harold Bloom, E.M.W. Tillyard, E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

### BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

**The theory:** Biographical criticism is a subset of historical criticism, the focus being narrowed to the *author’s life and thought*, relating these to his or her literature.

**Example:** Knowing about Flannery O’Connor’s lupus and her study of Roman Catholic theology adds much to our understanding of her writing. Suffering in her stories, for instance, takes on a special significance when we realize that she suffered immensely throughout her career. It is likewise useful to know that her story “Everything That Rises Must Converge” is in part an attempt to bring to life a principle introduced by Teilhard de Chardin, a theologian with whom O’Connor was fascinated.

**Disadvantage:** Remember the *Intentional Fallacy* (which we learned, incidentally, from the *new critics*—see below): Knowing an author’s intentions does not reveal all there is to know about the product of her or his imagination.

**Key players:** (in O’Connor criticism) Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, Robert Brinkmeyer, Frederick Asals, Gilbert Muller

### SOCIAL OR MARXIST CRITICISM

**The theory:** The ideas of Karl Marx, if they are considered *passé* in economics or politics nowadays, still exert great influence on criticism—and perhaps rightly so. Social critics believe that the best literature depicts most clearly the *economic or class struggles in society*.

**Example:** O’Connor’s “Greenleaf” is valuable to some extent because it accurately captures the tensions arising between the working class and landowners in the Georgia of the 1950’s. A Marxist critic can best analyze these tensions in the story.

**Disadvantage:** Social critics are characteristically far more committed to Marxist ideology than to literature. Their focus tends to waver accordingly.

**Key players:** Georg Lukacs, Walter Benjamin, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams

### FREUDIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

**The theory:** Strangely enough, Sigmund Freud is taken more seriously today for his contribution to literary criticism than for his psychology. Three Freudian *“psychoanalytical” concepts* are especially useful for us: (1) the dominance of the unconscious mind over the conscious, (2) the use of symbols by the unconscious mind to express itself, especially in dreams, and (3) sexuality as a motivating behavioral force. Many authors deliberately employ psychoanalytical principles in their writing, notably D.H. Lawrence, William Faulkner, and Franz Kafka.

**Example:** Since the actions of O.E. Parker in “Parker’s Back” are almost entirely outside the realm of conscious reason, any light that might be shed on his subconscious drives is valuable.

**Disadvantage:** Yes, discussion of literary characters in terms of their psychological make-up can often be useful, and yes, we can often benefit from exploring the truths an author reveals about human psychology, but using literature to *psychoanalyze an author* is almost entirely irrelevant. Parker’s subconscious drives are worthy of our attention, but who cares if the story proves that O’Connor is crazy?

**Key players:** Jacques Lacan, Bruno Bettelheim, Robert Lee Wolff, Peter Brooks, Jane Gallop, Julia Kristeva

## JUNGAN (ARCHETYPAL) PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

*The theory:* Swiss psychologist Carl Jung believed that a part of the individual's unconscious mind is linked by "communal memories" to the unconscious minds of all people. "Archetypes"—*characters, situations, and symbols—recur in works of imagination throughout history.* Characters such as heroes, rebels, cruel stepmothers, and saints are repeated in all cultures at all times, as are situations such as the quest, initiation, the fall, and death/rebirth. No culture is without symbols involving light and darkness or water and desert. While very few psychologists today accept Jung's theories, Jung remains useful for critics interested in *meaningful cultural patterns.*

*Example:* Mrs. Shortley is an excellent example of the archetypal "Earth Mother." Understanding her as such reveals much meaning in "The Displaced Person," especially in O'Connor's treatment of the intrusion of *the other* into an established social economy.

*Disadvantage:* Archetypes are sometimes present in literature, but their absence is far more common. We tie our own hands if they are all we are looking for. Bevel/Harry, The Misfit, and Mr. Guizac are *not* archetypes.

*Key players:* Joseph Campbell, Leslie A. Fiedler, Northrop Frye

## THE NEW CRITICISM AND RUSSIAN FORMALISM

*The theory:* The "new critics" and formalists laudably seek to bring readers' attention back to the literature itself—and steer it away from history, sociology, cultural or literary influences, and authors' intentions—subjects these critics consider irrelevant to the text.

*Everything needed to understand a work, they believe, can be found in the literature itself.*

*Example:* Knowing that O'Connor was a Roman Catholic is by no means necessary to enjoy or understand her stories. Such knowledge can, in fact, lead us to an erroneous prejudice in favor of clergymen or other religious characters, thereby causing us to miss much of her challenge to established religious assumptions.

*Disadvantage:* Why deliberately cut ourselves off from *any* avenue of understanding—even if we believe it to be of merely secondary importance?

*Key players:* *New Critics:* T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, W.K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley; *Formalists:* Victor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynyanov

## STRUCTURALISM

*The theory:* Structuralists determine meaning by applying the *linguistic* theories of another Swiss, Ferdinand de Saussure. A language for Saussure is a system of "signs," sounds representing things, ideas, actions, etc. Structuralist critics regard a literary genre as something like a language and specific works as analogous to the unique way an individual speaker uses that language. They study stories or poems in order to understand the *system of signs* that makes up a genre or literature as a whole. Structuralism is sometimes referred to as *semiotics.*

*Example:* A structuralist might be interested in O'Connor in terms of her semiotic contribution to the short story genre. Or such a critic might consider the manner in which O'Connor uses signs common to Western culture.

*Disadvantage:* Semiotic analyses are usually many steps removed from our experience of a particular work of literature. Structuralists seem to be far more interested in linguistics and cultural anthropology than in the meaning of the literature to real-world readers.

*Key players:* Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco

## POST-STRUCTURALISM (DECONSTRUCTION)

*The theory:* Like structuralism, post-structuralism addresses linguistic elements in literature. But because language is ambiguous, no "sign" ever referring consistently to a fixed referent, post-structuralists conclude that the notion of any meaning whatsoever being discoverable in a text is merely an illusion, the product of artistic trickery. The aim of a post-structuralist analysis is to *expose the meaninglessness* of a particular text.

*Example:* In O'Connor's "Good Country People," a nihilist philosopher is bested by a simple rural con-man who tells her, "I've been believing in nothing all my life." Similarly the post-structuralist finds himself or herself in the same position as the unsophisticated reader who insists, "Hell, I never did think them stories meant nothing."

*Disadvantage:* The post-structuralist, to me, is like a priest who becomes an atheist and continues to accept a salary from the Church.

*Key players:* Jacques Derrida, Paul DeMan, Michel Foucault

## READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

*The theory:* Reader-response critics study the *interaction of a reader with a text.* They assert that a story or poem is incomplete until the reader brings to it her or his unique battery of experiences, values, and beliefs. Remember Lawrence Sterne's "50/50" division of labor?

*Example:* A reader-response critic might examine the way Christian dogma shapes Western readers' understanding of O'Connor's fiction. A Buddhist or Muslim might find different meanings.

*Disadvantage:* Reader-response critics generally reject altogether the idea of fixed meaning. But if it is reasonable to regard O'Connor's work as meaningful in a context broader than mere Christian dogma, we must nevertheless insist upon its essential spiritual import. An *entirely* relativist view can take us too far from the text itself.

*Key players:* Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Judith Fetterley

## NEW HISTORICISM

*The theory:* New historicists, like the "old" ones, look to history in order to understand literature. For a new historicist, though, literature is *political*, part of the discourse system advancing the ideology of ruling elites to oppress and marginalize other groups. A story or a poem is studied as a *document either serving or opposing power structures.*

*Example:* O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge" challenges accepted views of race, even of *anti-racist* ideology. It might be studied as a catalyst for ideological change.

*Disadvantage:* Unless one accepts the political assumptions of new historicism, the system is largely meaningless. Harold Bloom calls new historicism "the school of resentment."

*Key players:* Michel Foucault, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., John Guillory

## FEMINIST CRITICISM

*The theory:* Historically men have controlled literary production and criticism, so the female voice has been grossly underrepresented in both. Feminist critics focus on (1) *literature by female authors*, (2) *previously ignored genres* to which female authors were once limited (e.g., diaries, letters), and (3) the *representation of females* in literature.

*Example:* How does O'Connor's gender affect her writing? How does it affect her presentation, say, of Ruby Turpin or Mrs. Shortley?

*Disadvantage:* Feminist criticism is an immensely necessary corrective, but its narrow focus can lead the critic to ignore other kinds of meaning.

*Key players:* Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Laura Mulvey