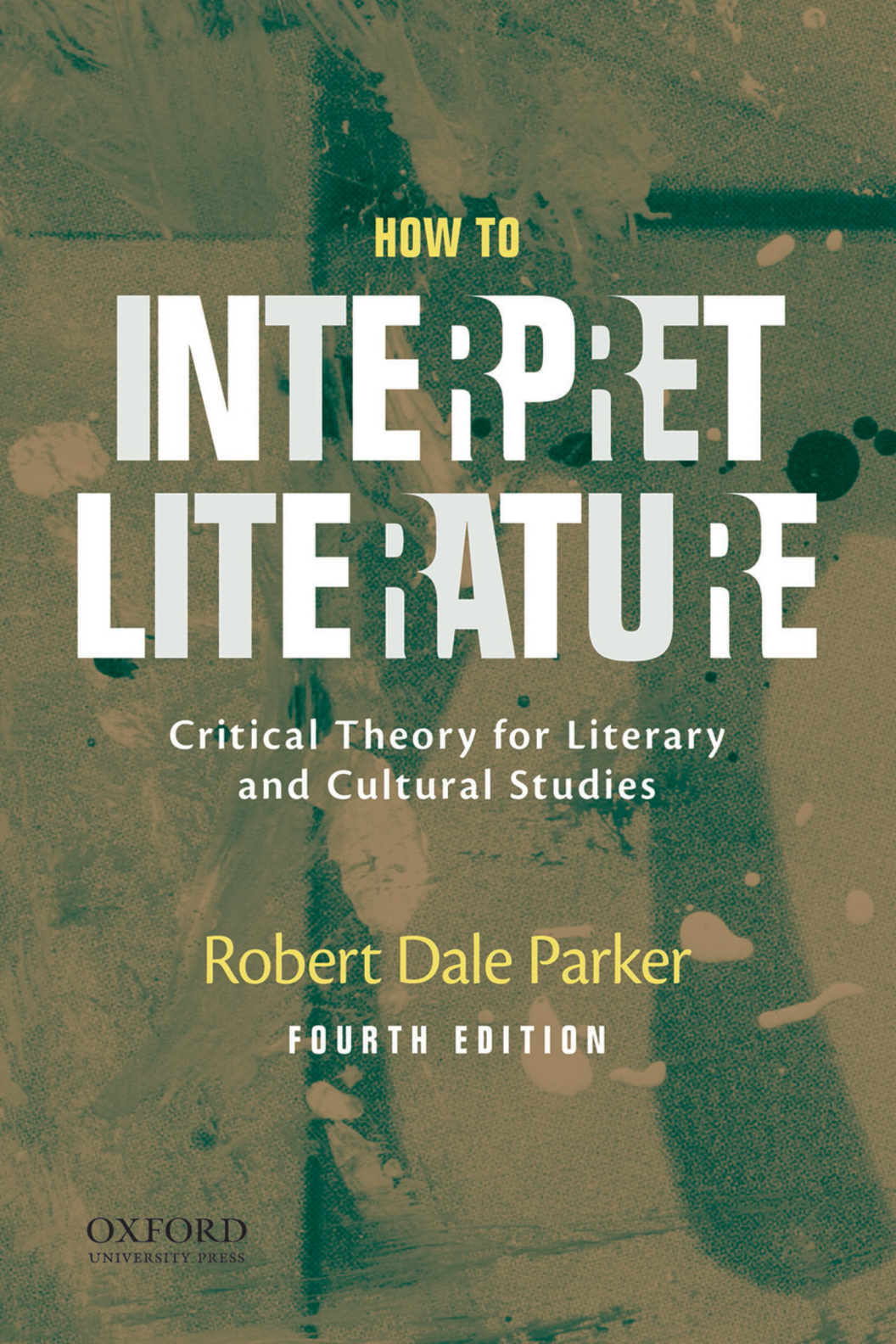
HOW TO
INTERPRET
LITERATURE
Critical Theory for Literary
and Cultural Studies
Robert Dale Parker
FOURTH EDITION
OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

How to Interpret Literature

How to Interpret Literature

Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies

Fourth Edition

Robert Dale Parker
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Description: Fourth edition. | New York : Oxford University Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Distinguished in the market by its ability to mesh accessibility and intellectual rigor, How to Interpret Literature offers a current, concise, and broad historicist survey of contemporary thinking in critical theory. Ideal for upper-level undergraduate courses in literary and critical theory, this is the only book of its kind that thoroughly merges literary studies with cultural studies, including film. Robert Dale Parker provides a critical look at the major movements in literary studies since the 1930s, including those often omitted from other texts. He includes chapters on New Criticism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Queer Studies, Marxism, Historicism and Cultural Studies, Postcolonial and Race Studies, and Reader Response. Parker weaves connections among chapters, showing how these different ways of thinking respond to and build upon each other. Through these exchanges, he prepares students to join contemporary dialogues in literary and cultural studies. The text is enhanced by charts, text boxes that address frequently asked questions, photos, and a bibliography"—Provided by publisher.
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Preface

I wrote this book because my students needed it and asked for it. As college and university literature and cultural studies courses have raised our expectations for teaching critical theory, the number of surveys and introductory theory books has grown. Some of those books have proven valuable. But based on my experience as a teacher, it seemed to me that we still needed a book that approaches critical theory more historically, showing how different movements in critical theory respond to and build on each other, and a book that goes beyond cautious textbook summaries to cover a good many issues, debates, and controversies that I did not see adequately addressed in other books on the topic. To name only a few out of many possible examples, as a teacher I wanted a book that did more than other such books to introduce narrative theory, because most students take a particular interest in novels and stories. I wanted a book that introduces the dialogues among different kinds of feminist criticism and a book that introduces queer studies, the debates over essentialism and the construction of race, the dialogues among critical race studies, postcolonial studies, and international indigenous studies, and newer movements of enormous consequence, such as disability studies and environmental studies. I also wanted a book that would take formalism seriously while at the same time taking history and cultural interpretation seriously. In that sense, I set out to write a critical theory survey committed to the interpretation of literature—including film—and at the same time committed to cultural studies and the interpretation of culture at large.

This book sets out to do all those things and to do them in readable language that does not assume previous knowledge of the material, yet also in language that takes students seriously and respects their curiosity and ability. In that spirit, I welcome feedback from students, teachers, and other readers.

The primary though not the only audience for this book is the critical theory survey course now routinely offered in college and university English and literature departments. I have tried to present the material in a format flexible enough to go along with the ways that different teachers approach a wide range of courses. Teachers, for example, may choose to use this book with a variety of other materials, depending on the course. The book may hover in the background as a supplement to the study of Shakespeare, the modern novel, film noir, and so on, or it may anchor a course in critical theory. For courses in critical theory, some teachers may choose to have this book carry the course, while others may combine it with readings from critical theorists. Interested instructors will find a concise selection of such readings in the companion volume to this book, *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*. They may also choose to combine this book with works of criticism and with works of literature and film. Some teachers will want to return to the same works of literature or film across a large part of the course, but different courses and populations of students will lead instructors to choose different works and strategies, sometimes changing from semester to semester, so I have opted to leave those decisions to instructors rather than to lock this book and its readers into relying on the same works over and over.

Now and then, I offer anecdotes from my own classroom experience. I have found that students appreciate and learn from such anecdotes, and I hope that readers beyond my classroom will find them helpful as well. I do not include samples of student writing, because many instructors find that such samples are not a good match for their own students and lead students to think too imitatively. Instructors who find student examples useful can probably find the best examples for their own students from previous students at their own institutions. Throughout the book, however, I provide examples of how to interpret literature and culture in dialogue with the movements in critical theory that this book presents. I have tried to write those examples to encourage, rather than to interfere with, teachers' and students' readiness to develop their own examples.

In many ways, Terry Eagleton's now dated classic *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) inspired this book, more than the various other books that arose in its wake. Though this book differs greatly from Eagleton's, for I bring fewer skills to the task and bring different limits and resources, I hope it can honor Eagleton's legacy, even while I speak from the perspective of a later generation and a different

intellectual history. I hope, as well, that this book can lead students to continue thinking about the issues that it puts forward as they move on to other courses and, beyond course work, as they live their daily lives.

WHAT'S NEW IN THE FOURTH EDITION

I am grateful for the enthusiastic response to the first three editions. The fourth edition continues what people liked in the earlier editions and makes many improvements. While it was not possible to follow every suggestion I received, I am grateful to the many scholars and teachers who shared their ideas, and I look forward to hearing responses to this new edition.

The new edition does not attempt to address every latest idea in current conversations around critical theory. Some additions seemed called for, but I have also tried to retain the book's focus and shape while telling a larger story. For the new edition I reviewed every page in every chapter many times, sharpening, condensing, expanding, changing or adding examples, and updating. Roughly half of the pages include at least a little revision, and many include extensive revision. The new edition uses subheadings more consistently across the various chapters, clarifying and highlighting the progression of ideas. I will list the larger revisions here, while recognizing that such a list masks the frequency of smaller but consequential revisions across the book.

- Chapter 3 now includes a review of Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of the sign, modestly expands the reading of sitcoms, and expands the ending of the reading of detective novels.
- Chapter 4 adds a box on common misunderstandings.
- Chapter 5 modestly expands its brief discussion of the mirror stage.
- For Chapter 6, I added a paragraph on how there are many different ways to be a feminist; expanded the discussion of sex and gender to take into account intersex and transgender identities; added remarks on the claim that feminism is a western export imposed on the rest of the world; clarified the discussion of Mulvey's argument about visual pleasure, including a short paragraph on the term "male gaze"; added a paragraph on bell hooks's critique of Mulvey, including hooks's concept of the oppositional gaze; and added a box on the claims that we have now reached a fourth-wave feminism.

- Chapter 7 now includes more about transgender identities; reviews the evolving vocabulary around queer identities; expands the section on Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume I;* adds Muñoz's concept of disidentification; and adds a section on the anti-social turn and queer time.
- Chapter 8 better highlights the connection between Althusser's understanding of ideology and Lacan's concept of misrecognition.
- Chapter 9 adds a box on the status of facts; adds a section on biopower; connects cultural studies to interpreting the resurgence of far-right politics; adds a section on Raymond Williams's terms dominant, residual, and emergent; and adds a short paragraph on the relation between cultural studies and aesthetics.
- Chapter 10 adds more on migration and Stuart Hall's discussion of hybridity; adds more about Fanon and racial labeling; further clarifies the discussion of Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"; adds a discussion of race, representation, and form; describes how indigenous identities are not the same as racial identities; sharpens the discussion of critical race theory, including the concepts of implicit bias, disparate impact, and white privilege; adds a section on racial appropriation; briefly brings in the debate between George S. Schuyler and Langston Hughes as well as Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression," and Beyoncé and Jay-Z's *Apes**t*; and adds a reading of Nella Larsen's *Passing.*
- Chapter 11 now includes distant reading.
- Chapter 12 adds a section on the nonhuman, brings in the relation between feminism and disability studies, better highlights invisible disabilities, and expands the discussion of the critique of disabilities stereotypes.
- The back of the book now also includes a concise glossary of terms for poetic form, which can complement the account of narrative theory in Chapter 3.

Acknowledgments

For a book like this, it is more than mere formula when I say that no one besides myself is responsible for my mistakes, oversights, and misjudgments. Nevertheless, I am grateful to many people for encouraging this book and helping to improve it. Over years of studying literature, literary criticism, and critical theory, I have learned so much related to this book from so many different people that the task of trying to name them all is too daunting to dare. I would inevitably leave out many people by oversight and for lack of space.

But some people cannot go unmentioned. I want to thank my students. They provoked me to think about the issues this book confronts and taught me to ask many of the questions it depends on. They made this book worth writing. More than that, they compelled me to write it. An extra thank-you goes out to the student—I wish I could remember who it was—who said something like "This course should be called 'How to Interpret Literature.' Then students who don't get it would realize how interesting this stuff is and realize that they need to learn it."

I would also like to thank Brian McHale for insisting, from early on, that there was more out there in criticism and theory than I had usually been led to believe, and Zohreh T. Sullivan for helping to convince me, long ago, that literary and critical theory had found ways to reach beyond the formalisms that I cherished but found confining. With pleasure and appreciation, I also thank the long list of challenging and dedicated friends and colleagues who have made it a privilege to work in the Department of English, the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, and the Program in American Indian Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. They continually expand my sense of what there is to know and make me question my own thinking. I am especially grateful to Janet M. Beatty, my

original editor at Oxford University Press, for her receptive interest in this book, her canny ability to point me in helpful directions, and her diligence in getting useful responses from the following readers of the manuscript for the first edition: Nathan A. Breen, DePaul University; Michael Calabrese, California State University, Los Angeles; Lynn A. Casmier-Paz, University of Central Florida; Barry J. Faulk, Florida State University; James Ford, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; George Hahn, Towson University; Brady Harrison, University of Montana; Susan Howard, Duquesne University; Cy Knoblauch, University of North Carolina at Charlotte; Ira Livingston, Pratt Institute; Alan S. Loxterman, University of Richmond; Elsie B. Michie, Louisiana State University; Harry Rusche, Emory University; and Douglass H. Thomson, Georgia Southern University. To those readers, as well, I am immensely grateful.

Thanks as well to the readers for the second edition: John Alberti, Northern Kentucky University; Jen Camden, University of Indianapolis; James Campbell, University of Central Florida; Wendy Carse, Indiana University of Pennsylvania; John Dudley, University of South Dakota; Tiffany Gilbert, University of North Carolina Wilmington; David Greven, Connecticut College; Christopher Hogarth, Wagner College; Paul Klemp, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh; Peggy Kulesz, University of Texas at Arlington; Chad Luck, California State University Santa Barbara; Christian Moraru, University of North Carolina at Greensboro; and Vicki Smith, Texas State University. I am also grateful to those who reviewed the second and third editions to advise about the possibility of a new edition: Kenneth Asher, SUNY Geneseo; Noelle Bowles, Kent State University at Trumbull; Tiffany Gilbert, University of North Carolina Wilmington; Evan Gottlieb, Oregon State University; David Greven, University of South Carolina; Paul Klemp, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh; Christine Kozikowski, University of New Mexico; Tracy Montgomery, Idaho State University; Richard Zumkhawala-Cook, Shippensburg University; Matthew Biberman, University of Louisville; Kirsti Cole, Minnesota State University; Jaime Goodrich, Wayne State University; Anthony Grajeda, University of Central Florida; Holly Henry, California State University, San Bernardino; Kathryn Ledbetter, Texas State University; Nowell Marshall, Rider University; Kevin Swafford, Bradley University; Jeffrey W. Timmons, Arizona State University-West; and Kelli D. Zaytoun, Wright State University.

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I have continued to be fortunate in my editors at Oxford University Press. For their work on the second edition, I remain grateful to Janet M. Beatty and her assistant Cory Schneider. My next editor, Frederick Speers, supported this book through its second and third editions with commitment and insightful suggestions. Thank you to him and to his assistants Talia Benamy and Kristina Nocerino. In a time of editorial turnover, I lucked out in the editor for the fourth edition, Steve Helba, who has been a model of sharp-minded, easy-to-work-with professionalism. Thank you to Steve, to his assistant Kora Fillet, and to Patricia Berube, who oversaw the production. And as always, and yet again, at the beginning, the middle, the end, and beyond, thank you to Janice N. Harrington.

1

Introduction

This book sets out to invite its readers into contemporary conversations about how to interpret literature, culture, and critical theory. It surveys the most influential patterns of thought in critical theory from the 1930s to the present, with a special interest in the role of critical theory for interpreting literature and culture. The study of critical theory has changed rapidly over the last few decades, and though teaching has changed more slowly than scholarship, teaching has now caught up. For many years, I felt impatient with my own field of English because of its attitude toward theory in the classroom. Since the mid-1970s, when I was an undergraduate, and arguably still today, "theory" has been at the center of what English professors do, but at the same time, many English professors worked by the unspoken principle that this thing at the center of what we do had better be kept a privileged secret. The idea was, go ahead and learn all the critical and literary theory that we can, and let it drive everything we do as professors of literature, but *don't tell the students*.

Don't tell the students, because it will scare them. Don't tell the students, because they can't handle it. They're not smart enough.

Fortunately, the fear of teaching theory in the classroom has mostly faded away, and at many schools it is already buried. When students read this book for a class, then, their teacher and perhaps the department their teacher belongs to are part of that change. Indeed, I have written this book because I join with the many critics—perhaps we are now a majority—who think that the idea that students cannot learn critical theory is nonsense. Theory will scare students if we do

it in a scary way, and I will admit that many professors discuss theory in ways that can scare off the uninitiated. But we do not have to discuss it that way.

Devotees of theory sometimes like to claim a privileged territory that they can paint as terribly difficult for everyone else, but it is not usually difficult unless we make it difficult, trying to make it sound sophisticated so that we can tell ourselves, and others, that we are sophisticated. In fact, most students are already sophisticated theorists. They just don't use the same vocabulary of theory that English professors use. While students may not know English professors' vocabulary, they have their own specialized vocabularies that most English professors do not know, and many of them theorize with their specialized languages enthusiastically. Does that mean that English professors are not smart enough to understand them? It only means, of course, that people who do not know a given vocabulary cannot speak the language that uses that vocabulary. And theory is a language with its own vocabulary of words and ideas, whether in the latest mix of music, technology, and social networking or in the scholarly, college, and university dialects of "literary theory," "critical theory," and "cultural criticism."

Since the early 1970s, the growth of "critical theory" (the broader category) and "literary theory" (the narrower category) has revolutionized literary criticism and cultural criticism. For a time, the swiftly accumulating changes came wrapped in scandal. How dare they contaminate—or even replace—the study of literature with "theory," opponents asked. In the late 1970s, many English and other literature departments splintered into pro- and antitheory factions. It was partly a generational difference, for to some people, theory seemed like the newfangled fad of the young. But the younger generations were learning the theory from older generations, and in its broadest sense theory goes back at least as far as the ancient storytellers and philosophers, so it was never just a matter of people's age. Eventually the sense of scandal disappeared, for no one asks theory to replace literature. And it is hard to argue convincingly that theory is bad, because by saying so, opponents of theory end up proposing another theory—the theory that theory is bad—so that they end up endorsing what they thought they were objecting to. Gradually, from the late 1970s and into the 1990s, the theory wars died out and theory went mainstream, sometimes over the objections of theorists themselves, who often fancy their role as troublemakers or gadflies.

Though the varieties of theory described in this book hit their first big threshold in the debates of English and literature departments,

they also drew on and then came back to influence ways of thinking in philosophy (which of course was always theoretical), linguistics, political science, history, communications, anthropology, film studies, sociology, and many other fields. Eventually, the growth of critical theory generated a common language that allowed people in different fields, and in widely varying precincts of the same fields, to talk with, understand, and learn from each other across their differing backgrounds and interests. Students and faculty from political science, for example, found that they could talk about their interests with students and faculty in English in ways that they rarely could before.

That helps give the lie to the complaint, still occasionally heard, that theory is so arcane that it makes literary study irrelevant at a time when relevance and connection to the troubled, practical world have a desperate urgency. In fact, and as we will see as this book moves along, theory is about nothing if it is not about the interweaving of literary study, critical study, and the everyday world where all of us live. This book—and the ideas it presents and discusses—sets out not to make literary study less meaningful in our daily lives, but to make it more meaningful. So much so that as you read this book, you might start to find connections between what this book discusses and a great many other things you care about, such as politics, art and beauty, the environment, music, movies, social policy, identity, and on and on, including, for students, a wide range of classes in literary studies and other fields. Literature connects to and is part of everything else around us, and literary criticism, critical theory, and the study of literature also connect to and are part of everything else. This book sets out to bring all those things together: literature, criticism, theory, cultural studies, and everything around us. In short, this is a book about how, every day, we interpret—and can enjoy interpreting—the dialogue between art and daily life.

Criticism, *theory*, *literature*. Students sometimes ask what we mean when we refer to *criticism*, because criticism does not usually carry the same meaning in literary and cultural studies as it carries in casual conversation. When we use the term *criticism* in casual conversation, it refers to saying what we dislike. But that is not what the term means in this book, and it is not what the term typically means in critical writing or in college and university literature, film, and cultural studies classes. Instead, as this book uses the term, and as cultural, film, and literary critics typically use the term, it refers to interpretation and insightful commentary. While film and book reviewers see their

role as judging whether a film or book is good or not-so-good, critical writing focuses far more on interpreting and usually lets judgments about a work's value remain implicit or peripheral.

Even so, there is a difference between *criticism* and *theory*. Criticism tends to focus on interpreting a cultural practice, such as a movie, a music video, a trend in fashion or social networking, a novel, a play, or a poem. Theory tends to focus, by contrast, on proposing or interpreting models for how to do criticism. Nevertheless, theory and criticism overlap, because theory includes criticism and criticism draws, at least implicitly, on theory. Still more, as I discuss later, theory and criticism depend on each other and can even merge into each other.

Some criticism, however, focuses less on theory. And some ways of thinking about models for criticism do not usually find room under the umbrella of critical theory and thus are not included in this book. For example, while readers will find an appendix of terms for discussing poetic form at the back of the book, this book does not focus on poetic form (*prosody*) or offer suggestions about how to craft a critical essay. Such concerns can influence how we think about, understand, and write criticism; but other, easily found books already address those concerns well, so this book concentrates more on the topics typically associated with critical theory.

It can probably help, as well, to ask what we mean by the term *literature*. The truth is, there is no exact, definitive, and widely agreed-on meaning for the term *literature*. For the purposes of this book, literature is simply those things we refer to by the word *literature*. For more traditional critics, literature refers to poetry, drama, and fiction and perhaps sometimes to more self-consciously artful essays or autobiography. In recent years, however, as we will see through the course of this book, the term has opened up considerably. It can include any writing that people wish to study with the same critical intensity and appreciation that critics traditionally bring to poetry, drama, and fiction, and not only writing, but also film. More broadly still, especially under the influence of cultural studies, critics increasingly see the textuality of literature as overlapping with the textuality of all language and with the textuality, loosely speaking, of popular culture and other forms of communication, whether written (a magazine article, a poem), aural (music, speech), visual (photography, painting), kinetic (sports, dance), or some combination of those (film, new media). While in the narrow sense of the term, literature often continues to refer to poetry, drama, fiction, and perhaps essays and autobiography, critics seem comfortable moving

back and forth between narrower and broader uses of the term, without worrying over definitions and flexible categories. In that way, then, this book takes heed of film and popular culture as well as poetry, drama, and fiction.

The shape of this book. Some instructors may choose to assign the chapters of this book in a different order. For example, while many instructors have praised the sequence of chapters, some have chosen to assign Marxism or reader response earlier in the sequence, or to separate postcolonial studies and race studies, or to combine queer studies and feminism under the category of gender studies. While the book can accommodate such strategies and others like them, the progression of chapters follows a shape that it may help to lay out explicitly at the beginning.

For the most part, the book follows a chronological sequence, and in a sense it is also circular. If you look at the table of contents, you might think that it does not look chronological, because even readers who do not yet know much about the ways of thinking referred to in the table of contents will sometimes know, for example, that psychoanalysis began before structuralism or deconstruction, that feminism began before psychoanalysis, or that Marxism began before queer studies. But rather than organizing the chapters in a sequence according to when each way of thinking began, I have put them in a sequence that roughly follows when each way of thinking reached its threshold in the history of literary criticism and theory. There are two exceptions. The chapter on queer studies comes a little early in the sequence, right after the chapter on feminism, because queer studies builds closely on feminism. Many critics, as we have already seen, even group them together as movements in gender studies. And the chapter on reader-response criticism comes near the end, before the recent and emerging developments, simply because it refers to issues from other chapters in ways that will grow clearer if it comes after those other chapters. In the process, the chapter on reader response can help review the earlier parts of the book. Apart from those two exceptions, I have chosen the roughly chronological sequence not out of some sterile notion of counting the years, but because it tells a story across the book.

That is to say, each movement in criticism and theory draws on and responds to the movements that preceded it, and so to understand each movement, it helps to have studied the movements that came before it. For that reason also, as we move forward in the book, our patterns of thought will build on each other and make the discussion

cumulative. Beginning especially with Chapter 4, on deconstruction, as we work with each new movement we will use the movements that preceded it. Deconstruction, as we will see in Chapter 4, is partly a response to structuralism, from Chapter 3. And structuralism (not in its roots, but in its use by literary critics, especially in the United States) is partly a response to new criticism, from Chapter 2. Psychoanalysis began with Freud's work before new criticism, structuralism, and deconstruction, but it did not grab powerful hold of literary criticism until after it had structuralism and deconstruction to work with. Feminist criticism, then, responded profoundly to psychoanalysis, and so on through the rest of the book. In that way, the book tells a story. But also in that way, the chapter boundaries are not as firm as the table of contents might suggest, because when we study any one method, we will continue to study the methods before it.

As we study the earlier ways of thinking, I will risk making things a little more difficult, now and then, by peeking forward to begin (just briefly) making comparisons to ways of thinking that came later. While in the short run that risks confusing readers, in the long run it makes things easier and clearer, because it would be artificial to pretend, while studying a set of ideas from the past, that other ideas from later on have not influenced the way we can understand the older ideas. In discussing new criticism, for example, I will draw (a little) on historicism, because now that critics have developed a new range of skills for reading historically, it would be false to pretend that historicist insights cannot help us read new criticism, even though the new critics themselves (as we will see) were not especially historicist. Similarly, it would be false, and even damaging, to rule out references to feminism before we reach the chapter that specifically focuses on feminism. Whatever readers know or do not know about feminism, it will be on many readers' minds from the beginning of the book, and that is a good thing, not a problem.

At the same time that the sequence of chapters has a chronological shape, in another sense it has a circular shape. That is to say, at the end we will return to where we began. The new critics whom we will begin with wanted to make criticism more formalist (we will see what that means soon, in Chapter 2), and in making it more formalist they tended to make it less cultural and historical. The structuralists and deconstructionists, then, whatever their differences from the new critics and from each other, extended that interest in formalism. Then eventually, as we will see, many critics reacted against formalism and sought to take criticism back to a focus on the cultural and

historical. In that sense, the story this book tells is circular. But when critics returned to the cultural and historical, they returned in the light of the intense developments in formalist criticism under the new critics, structuralists, and deconstructionists, which meant that in their hands, cultural and historical criticism looked dramatically different from how it looked several generations earlier, before the new critics. That is the story that this book will tell.

Along the way, the book will introduce a great deal of vocabulary, because, as we have already suggested, studying critical theory is not only *like* studying a language, it *is* studying a language. And so this book will go a good distance toward introducing the language of critical theory. Sometimes the terms are specialized and stuffy, and other times they are lively and provocative. Either way, the terms have a momentum behind them, and so learning them can at the least help us follow other people's use of them. At the most, the terms can help us learn and use the concepts of criticism. Each term provides a handle that helps us grasp the idea it represents and that may help us turn that idea to use, whether we respond to the idea skeptically or enthusiastically. (Key terms appear in **bold** when they are introduced and explained, usually the first time they appear in the book. In the index, those terms are also bolded, along with the numbers for pages that introduce and explain them. After finishing the book, some readers may find it helpful to go back over the concepts by reviewing the bolded terms in the index.) Along the way, as well, the approach of the book will change a little after the first few chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 run longer, not because new criticism and structuralism are more important than the topics in later chapters, but because, besides introducing new criticism and structuralism, those chapters also introduce the overall book. Later chapters can sometimes be shorter, because the earlier chapters will already have introduced many of the key concepts and terms that later methods of criticism rely on.

In the process, this book attempts to include two different approaches. Some scholars, teachers, and students of critical and literary theory favor an approach that studies theory for the sake of theorizing, while other scholars, teachers, and possibly a majority of students favor an approach that addresses theory for the sake of interpretation, such as the interpretation of literature or film. Rather than leaning in one direction or the other, this book respects both impulses and is willing, at any given point, to favor one or the other, if that helps get across a concept. I see the opposition between theory and interpretation as a false dichotomy, what deconstructionists call

a *false binary*. Without trying either to balance them or to lean in either direction, this book welcomes the conflict between theory and interpretation as a fruitful provocation. I try to speak in practical, accessible, and provocative ways both to theory itself and to the interpretive "application" or "use" of theory without the skepticism that each of these interests sometimes brings to the other, for I see theory and interpretation as versions of each other, two faces of the same coin.

Readers will get the most from this book if, when possible, they read the written literature or watch the films that the book takes as examples for detailed discussion. Even so, I provide enough quotation or context to help readers unfamiliar with the works. And for longer texts, such as films, plays, and novels, I have kept in mind that readers who do not already know the works may not find it convenient to read them or watch them while reading this book. But many of the sample texts are so short that they are included within the book or are easy to find and read, because they are readily available online and in libraries.

Thus, at the appropriate point in the course, instructors might assign (or students might read on their own initiative) John Donne's "The Canonization," Emily Dickinson's "Further in summer than the birds," Walt Whitman's "Beat! Beat! Drums!," Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of a Jar," Section 11 of Whitman's "Song of Myself," Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton," Elizabeth Bishop's "First Death in Nova Scotia," Ernest Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain," Bharati Mukherjee's "Jasmine," Dorothy Parker's "A Telephone Call," Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool," Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory," Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," William Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, and Robert Frost's "Design." Films and videos discussed in at least a little detail include *The Descent*, *Salt*, *Top Gun*, *A Single Man*, *Apes**t*, and especially *The Crying Game*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Dirty Pretty Things*, and *Avatar*. While *Get Out* is mentioned only briefly, it can go well with Chapter 10's discussion of racial appropriation.

With these works and the many others that the book discusses or mentions, I have tried to choose a variety of examples. A few instructors have asked me to scrap most of the earlier materials and focus only on contemporary writing and on film from the last few years, or focus much more on the time period that the instructor specializes in,

but that would go against most other instructors' interests and goals. Still more, it would pass up the chance to model the possibility and the pleasure of reading and viewing across a wide range of film, TV, and literary history. In that spirit, this book works with all periods of English-language literature, including both older and more recent writing, film, and TV. It also works with both longer and shorter literature and with a variety of genres, including poems, short stories, films, novels, TV shows, and plays. As most of the book's readers come from English departments, the literary examples draw mostly on English-language literature. I am encouraged, nevertheless, that readers interested—as I hope we all are—in a wide range of languages and literatures have found the book useful.

One caution, and one word to the wise: First, the caution. As readers new to the material get excited about how the new ideas influence their thinking, they can find themselves reading on eagerly and quickly. While such eagerness is appealing, most readers will learn more if they pace their reading. Instead of reading multiple chapters in quick succession or even reading an entire chapter at once, most readers will find it helpful to break up a chapter into two or more episodes of reading, giving them time to contemplate the material and begin getting used to each method's patterns of thinking before they read onward. The structuralism chapter, especially, introduces a large number of concepts, making it helpful to read on the installment plan and focus, at first, on getting the key general ideas. Readers can always go back and review the particulars later. After finishing a chapter, many readers find it helpful to reread the passages that offer interpretations of particular texts (which often but not always come in the "How to Interpret" sections). Rereading those passages from the perspective gained by finishing a chapter can help readers develop a feeling for the questions, assumptions, and patterns of thinking that characterize each body of thought.

Now, the word to the wise: Most critical and literary theory after the new criticism comes from the political left, and most of it is secular. I say this up front not to scare off readers who may not come from a left or secular perspective, but instead to welcome them to the conversation. I believe that it is better to make that explicit than to try to sneak it in. Most people who teach and write about the material discussed in this book approach it as if all their readers and students will share their left and secular perspectives. While I recognize that many readers of this book will share those perspectives, either more or less, I do not assume that all students, teachers, and other readers

will join me in such views. I also believe that left and secular positions need have no monopoly on the ideas and debates discussed in this book. Even Marxist strategies of interpretation (if not Marxist goals) seem to me mostly adaptable to right-wing thinking. In many respects, the ideas in this book can be debated, endorsed, or applied by readers on the right just as well as by readers on the left. It would be healthy for critical theory to have the right and left join in more dialogue, and more mutually informed dialogue, about the debates that this book reviews.

I have written this book in part because I find that the courses I teach that evolved into this book make more difference to students than any other courses I teach. They make so much difference because learning about critical theory helps us think about everything else we do, and it often helps us think about those things in dramatically new and exciting ways. While this book sets out to help its readers think and write about literature, including film, it also assumes a give-and-take relation between literature and everything else, so that it tries to help readers discover ways to build what they can do as critical thinkers in general. That, in turn, can feed back into our thinking about literature, which then can feed our other thinking all the more, which comes back yet again to energize our thinking about literature, and so on in a cycle that can inspire our commitment to and pleasure in literary and cultural interpretation.

2

New Criticism

The new criticism is now the old criticism and the bogeyman that every later critical method defines itself against, but when the new criticism emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, it seemed revolutionary. It radically changed critical practice, especially in the United States. Though it is far out of fashion now, the new criticism continues to wield enormous influence, even on many critics and teachers who reject it.

When I introduce students to new criticism, I like to ask how many of them, in their previous experience in literature classes, have heard any of the following phrases, which all come from new criticism: close reading, evidence from the text, pay attention to the text itself, pay attention to the words on the page, unpack the words. Every time I ask that question, sometimes to classes as large as seventy students, every single student raises a hand, even students from continents far beyond the United States. It has a powerful effect when students look around the room and see that every one of them shares that experience. Then I ask how many of them have heard of new criticism? Suddenly, all but a few hands drop. Sometimes I ask if the few people whose hands have not dropped think they might be able to define new criticism (telling them, of course, that I won't actually put them on the spot and ask them to define it), and usually their hands drop too, or if they don't drop, they wobble.

In short, across an enormous range of different schools, in colleges and high schools, many English teachers have taught students these principles but not told them about the larger set of ideas that

the principles come from. I want to take the opposite approach here. This book sets out to bring students behind the curtain and invite them to join the sometimes-hidden discussions about critical theory that drive the study of English.

Methods of interpretation. In fact, though some teachers do not tell students this, everything the students have done in their English classes over the years has followed, and owes its ideas to, a selection of specific *methods of interpretation.* By keeping quiet about those methods in front of students, teachers make it harder for students to question what we do in English classes and also make it harder for students to learn what their teachers are doing and to figure out ways to do it themselves. By contrast, if we make the methods visible, then students can evaluate those methods (and how the teachers use them). That might make it harder for teachers, if the teachers do not want their students to think critically about what the teachers do, but to my mind getting students to think critically about what their teachers do is a good thing. And in the process, for most students, the study of critical method—of critical theory—will make English easier, and far more interesting, and even more *fun.* In that way, this book sets itself against the view that critical theory is too difficult for students. We make literary study too difficult if we cloak its premises in mystifying secrecy, but we make it more accessible—and more honest—if we yank open the curtain to reveal the squeaky machinery behind it.

Students may find it helpful, as they read this book or after reading it, to use what they read about here to help themselves ask, in every class (not just English classes), what methods of criticism (or thinking, or experiment, or research, and so on) the class is using. What are the specific characteristics of those methods? Why would people choose those methods, or not choose them? Why would other people choose other methods, and what other methods might they choose? How would different methods produce different results? How have the methods changed over time, and why? If it were up to you, what methods would you choose? These are the questions we will ask about literary and cultural criticism in this book. The assumption is that readers will get far more out of their interests in literature and criticism and their interests in artistic and cultural expression in general (movies, music, paintings, websites, politics, sports, and so on) if they step back and think about the methods at stake when they think about literature, art, and culture. Critical theory, in short, is simply thinking about thinking. We can think more expansively—and enjoyably—if in the process of thinking we also think about thinking.

The new critics were the first modern Anglo-American critics to set up a programmatic, deliberate method for interpreting literature, and in that sense they begin the story that this book tells. Moreover, since everything we will study later in this book defines itself, in part, as an alternative and response to new criticism, we can better understand more recent ways of thinking about how to interpret literature and culture if we first get a good grounding in new criticism.

BEFORE NEW CRITICISM

While for the most part this book begins with new criticism, we can better understand new criticism and today's criticism if we look briefly at the state of things before new criticism, at the practices that the new critics invented new criticism to replace. New criticism succeeded so widely in taking over the critical landscape that even now, when every later critical method sets itself against it, new criticism has come to seem so natural that students often find it hard to imagine alternatives to new criticism or to understand how it seemed new from the 1930s to the 1950s. New—as opposed to what?

Before the new critics, the classroom study of English literature routinely focused on history, on what the new critics sneered at as "impressionistic" responses to literature, on moralizing, and on reading aloud. The new critics set up their ways of reading literature in direct opposition to each of these previous routines.

History. Teachers and critics who focused the study of literature on history often concentrated on the writer's biography. Sometimes they focused on the writer's "milieu," meaning the writer's circle of friends and of other writers and artists. Many historical critics gave special attention to studying a writer's influences and sources. For example, they might note that the British Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, uses lyrical language that often echoes the lyrical language of his predecessor, the British Romantic poet John Keats. Sometimes they would go to great lengths to trace individual words or phrases, pointing out that Tennyson echoes or repeats words and phrases from Keats or perhaps from an earlier poet, such as Edmund Spenser. Beginning with the new criticism, this kind of source and influence study came to seem arcane or dry. Despite a gossipy exception here and there, it does not usually hold students' interest for long. Biography continues to interest readers, but many critics, influenced by the new critics, believe that biography tends to stray from the point, for they believe that the point is the literature itself, in the "text" that

new critics ask us to read "closely." (We will address biography again later in this chapter, when we talk about the *intentional fallacy*.)

Sometimes, especially at the graduate level, the historical study of literature focused on "philology," that is, on the history of the language (in this case, English). Scholars of philology and literature study how literature shows the way languages have changed over time. To the new critics, such study offered scholarship but not much of the criticism and interpretation that they saw as crucial for literary study.

Impressionism. The new critics wanted a rigorous, systematic, theorized approach to literature. They looked down on more casual approaches, which they dubbed mere impressionism. To say that Tennyson's "Marianna" is the saddest poem in the English language or that the humor of Shakespeare's Falstaff or the suspense of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* can warm troubled hearts would seem anti-intellectual to the new critics. They saw remarks like that as mere fluff that we need to replace with concrete methods of criticism.

To some readers, the new critics suffered from what we might call "science envy," and we can understand why. Literary studies and science both held considerable prestige, but they did not hold the same prestige. In the university environment of the first half of the twentieth century, the hard or social sciences might seem more established than English. They had methods, and their methods gave them an identity. If professors taught or wrote about sociology, they were sociologists. If they taught or wrote about botany, physics, or chemistry, they were botanists, physicists, or chemists. But if you crossed the university lawn to the professors who taught or wrote about English literature, what would you call them? There was no term for it and no concrete sense of what they actually did as scholars or teachers. The new critics, who sometimes wrote anxiously about the relation between science and literary study, sought to change that fuzziness of definition by proclaiming that the work of literary study is criticism and that criticism has its own methods, just like chemistry or sociology. To the new critics, criticism was not about vague impressions or feelings. It was about methodical interpretation.

Moralizing. In that context, moralizing had no place in criticism, the new critics thought. The point of studying William Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" is not to teach us how to behave better. We do not—or should not—read Emily Dickinson's "Further in summer than the birds" for the purpose of learning to appreciate the environmental value of crickets or even to gain a profounder understanding of loneliness. The point of Austen's novels is not to

teach us when to speak out and when to hold our tongue, and the point of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, for a new critic, is not to teach us the danger of adultery or to instruct us in sympathy for our neighbors. To new critics, criticism should look for the art or artistic form of the story, not for the moral of the story.

It would get hard for new critics to insist on that distinction for literary works explicitly devoted to moral or ethical causes, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, but they would happily escape that bind by seeing such works as propaganda and not as great art fit for serious critical analysis. To be sure, not everyone agrees about that distinction between propaganda and art, especially for more self-consciously literary works that still speak directly to politics, such as Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its film and TV adaptations, or Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy. But new critics would avoid such examples, or they would see the combination of art and political commitment in such books as coincidental, with the politics not illuminating the art. Such examples can start to show the theoretical rectitude that often attracted people to new criticism and that also made many people skeptical of an aesthetic fastidiousness and social aloofness in the new critics. Readers may continue to see both sides of that dilemma as this chapter goes along.

Reading aloud. Before the new critics, many literature classrooms took no interest in the goals of criticism as the new critics understood those goals. Teachers and students cared more about the appreciation and the performance of literature than about the criticism of it. That pattern continues in some classrooms, especially in the lower grades or, at some colleges, in general education courses for nonmajors. In that vein, and especially before the new critics, many classes gave little or no heed to criticism and concentrated on reading the literature out loud. New critics might not object to reading aloud, but they would see it as just a beginning, as incidental to their critical goals, rather than see reading aloud itself as the goal.

Let me give an example. Once long ago I heard Maynard Mack, a distinguished and by then elderly critic of Shakespeare and eighteenth-century British literature, tell a story about what college classes in English literature were like before the new critics, based on his recollection of his time as a student. (He graduated from Yale University in 1932.) He said that a Shakespeare class on *Romeo and Juliet* might begin with the professor asking the students to write an

account of how they once felt the way that Romeo feels. (At Yale in those days, all the students were male. I wonder how things might have gone if they were asked to recall a time when they felt the way Juliet feels or if they were given a choice between Romeo and Juliet.) A class like that usually strikes today's college students, when I tell that story, as far from what they would expect at the college level in our own time, and in that way it gives us a feeling for the impressionism that the new critics rebelled against and for how dramatic a change they brought to the study of literature.

HOW TO INTERPRET: KEY CONCEPTS FOR NEW CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

Interpretation, close reading, and unity. Instead of history, impressionism, moralism, or reading out loud, the new critics called for the study of literature to focus on rigorous, systematic *interpretation*. For the new critics, the best response to a literary text is an interpretation of that text. And the best way to develop interpretation, according to the new critics, is through **close reading,** which means detailed, careful attention to evidence from the text itself, to the words on the page.

The study of history, philosophy, religion, and politics, they believed, is acceptable for background, but it is no substitute for close study of the text itself. After all, they reasoned, we can explain nonliterary writing by studying its history, ideas, beliefs, and politics, but literary writing (poems, plays, stories, and novels) differs from other writing—and to the new critics, literary writing was its own special category. They saw literary writing as primarily about literary art and only secondarily about ideas and beliefs. The art, they insisted, rests in the literary form, in the way that literary texts use words, as opposed to resting in the ideas that the words express. They dismissed literary commentary that focuses on history and culture as **extrinsic criticism,** as not really literary criticism, because it concentrates on matters they saw as outside (extrinsic to) the literary text. They called instead for **intrinsic criticism,** criticism that focuses on the text itself.

They also believed that good literature is unified. The new critics were not the first to exalt unity in literature or art. In Plato's *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BCE) Socrates argues "that every discourse ought to be a living creature, having a body of its own and a head and feet; there should be a middle, beginning, and end, adapted to one another and to the whole" (Plato 3: 172–173). Similarly, in his *Poetics* (c. 350 BCE) Plato's student Aristotle argues that "tragedy is an imitation of an action

that is complete, and whole. . . . A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end . . . , the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed" (Aristotle 65, 67). While such ideas have long been commonplace, the new critics intensified the focus on unity as a defining feature of great art. They often grounded their thinking in what they called **organic unity,** the belief that an admirable literary work forms an **organic whole.** The term *whole* suggests completeness and self-sufficiency, as if, to interpret a work of literature that forms an organic whole, we need to read only the work of literature itself. The term *organic* (referring to living organisms, such as plants and animals) suggests that the unity is natural and complete and that an admirable work of literature, like a plant, grows naturally into its full expression and beauty, with each of its parts unified with each other part. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Romantic poet and critic, famously put it, "a *legitimate* poem . . . must be one, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement" (Coleridge 2: 13).

By now, that view of unity is embedded in our typical cultural assumptions about art and the value of art. Most readers can probably remember conversations about a movie when someone said that he or she liked the way one part of the movie went with another part, maybe through foreshadowing, or echoing, or simple repetition or consistency. Readers can probably also remember conversations when someone said that she or he did not like a movie because part of it did not fit with another part. Perhaps the movie's ending clashed with something in the middle, or viewers saw a troubling inconsistency in character, plot, mood, or cinematography. In cases like that, viewers judge by a principle that privileges unity. They assume that if a work of art is unified, that is good, and if it is not unified, that is bad.

Most readers can probably remember similar discussions in literature classrooms, when students or the teacher pointed out unities or disunities, working from the assumption that unity is good and disunity is bad. Many an English class takes the form of students arguing about, or students or the teacher pointing out, how different features of a literary text fit together or explain each other, working from a taken-for-granted assumption that unity is good and that pointing out unity in a work of literature might convince skeptical students to appreciate and enjoy the work as literary art. Eventually, we will see ways to question the assumption that a literary text should be unified

and to question the assumption that our purpose as critics is to find the unity in a good text (or the disunity in a not-so-good text). But for now, the point is simply to underline the focus on unity or organic unity as a new critical assumption that grew so **naturalized** (so taken for granted, as if it were simply natural) that we do not usually even recognize it as an assumption.

Paradox, ambiguity, tension, and irony. The new critics' commitment to interpretation revolutionized the study of literature. In the process of pursuing interpretation and arguing for a systematic approach to literature, they popularized four key overlapping concepts—paradox, ambiguity, tension, and irony—along with intense attention to patterns and symbols. These terms and concepts have grown so familiar that most students have no idea that we owe much of their routine use in literary interpretation to the new critics.

Paradox, ambiguity, tension, and irony, for the new critics, typify the connotative art of literary writing, as opposed to what they saw as the denotative straitjacket of scientific writing. A **paradox** refers to an expression that combines opposite ideas, such as when Shakespeare's witches tell Macbeth that "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Similarly, Shakespeare's Sonnet 138 proclaims, "I do believe her, though I know she lies" (Shakespeare 1360, 1868), and Wordsworth tells us, in "My Heart Leaps Up," that "The Child is father of the Man" (Wordsworth 62). Sometimes paradoxes are witty, such as in the poems of John Donne (a new critical favorite). In "The Canonization," Donne wittily and paradoxically merges religious and erotic language. He argues that the love between his lover and himself can "canonize" them (make them into saints), saying (in a punning paradox on the Renaissance notion of orgasm as a little death) that "Wee can dye by it, if not live by love."

Ambiguity, similarly to paradox, refers to suggestively multiple and unsettled meanings. The end of Zora Neale Hurston's story "Sweat," for example, leaves the blame for Sykes's death ambiguous. His battered wife, Delia, could have prevented it, but readers might want to blame Sykes for Delia's inability or, ambiguously, her unwillingness to prevent his grisly demise. "The Canonization" leaves it ambiguous whether Donne exalts or spoofs religion by comparing it to sexual love, and ambiguous whether he exalts or spoofs sexual love by comparing it to religion.

Tension refers to ideas that stay connected and yet at the same time also pull away from each other without reaching resolution. The term *tension* often confuses students who are new to its use this way,

as a term about language or literature. It does not refer to tension as in "My roommate's crazy habits make me really tense" or "This critical theory stuff makes me tense." It is not an emotional tension, though sometimes it includes emotional tension. Instead, it is a suspended set of conflicting possibilities that will not settle into resolution, as in Emily Dickinson's paradoxical insistence that "Much Madness is divinest Sense" (Dickinson 278). "The Canonization" evokes a tension between religious exaltation and erotic exaltation, especially in such lines as "Wee can dye by it, if not live by love" and "all shall approve / Us *Canoniz'd* for Love" (Donne 11–12), where the off-rhyme between "love" and "approve" can evoke an ambiguous blend of assertiveness with modesty or hesitation. To take one more example and bring several strands together, we can see an ambiguous paradox in the tension between opposed meanings of the scarlet letter in Hawthorne's novel about Hester Prynne, who wears an "A" on her breast, a scarlet letter that over the course of the novel comes to stand for many possibilities, ranging from adultery to angel and even—it might seem for a new critic—to ambiguity itself.

To most readers, **irony** is probably a more familiar term. Though deeply linked with new criticism, it has a life of its own before and after new criticism and remains too common a term for the new critics to have it to themselves. *Irony* is notoriously slippery and hard to define, but we can approximate a definition by saying that it refers to an expression or event that means something different connotatively from what it means denotatively. The same words can easily gain or lose irony, depending on the context and on the way we read them or speak them. Is Donne's "The Canonization" ironic? A new critic might say that the poem's paradoxes set up a linguistic tension that makes it ambiguous whether the connection between sex and religion is ironic or straightforward. But often we know irony when we see it. We see irony in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* when we learn the secret that Pip's mysterious benefactor is the last person Pip would otherwise feel beholden to. Or we might find it ironic in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* that Charles Bon, the very man who offers the possibility of fulfilling Sutpen's dreams, also threatens to destroy those dreams. (We might also find it ironic that Bon threatens to expose the tragic way that Sutpen founds his ambition on horrendous misconceptions about class, race, and men's abuse of women. But that would take us into critiquing social structures, which, as we will soon see, the new critics tended to shy away from critiquing.)

Key New Critical Concepts

Close reading of a literary text, through the study of:

- paradox, ambiguity, tension, irony
- patterns, symbols
- unity (organic unity, balance)

By this point in the description of new criticism, some readers might smell a rat. How can the new critics believe that the same poem, novel, story, or play they describe as fraught with paradox, ambiguity, tension, and irony is also unified? That paradox in new criticism dramatizes a key issue for the new critics, an apparent contradiction that threatened to topple their entire system, because paradox, ambiguity, tension, and irony might seem to make the literary text a seething stew of conflicts, which sounds like the opposite of unity. But the new critics managed to make that apparent contradiction integral to their system.

They proposed that eventually, at least in great literature, the paradoxes, ambiguities, tensions, and ironies all balance each other out, suspending the competing energies in a unifying harmony. That way of reading takes what might seem like a fatal contradiction between unity, on the one hand, and paradox, ambiguity, tension, and irony, on the other hand, and turns the apparent contradiction into a unity-making machine, into the very definition of great literature. It also takes the work of finding that balance and turns it into the purpose and goal of literary criticism.

Even readers learning here about new criticism for the first time have probably seen and heard criticism work according to that new critical model many times, in the classroom, in criticism they may have read, and perhaps even in papers they have written (or papers they may have seen by other students). The usual pattern is pretty standard now, but the new critics invented it. First the critic, whether a professional critic or a student writing a paper, finds a problem. For the new critics, the problem, as we have seen, often took the form of a paradox, ambiguity, tension, irony, or a combination of those overlapping categories. Then the critic traces the pattern of that problem as it repeats itself across the text. For example, we might find a series

of moments in Donne's "The Canonization" that suggest a paradoxical, ambiguous, potentially ironic tension between the language of religion, or love of God, and the language of eroticism and earthly love. (This is exactly what Cleanth Brooks, one of the founding new critics, did in an influential discussion of Donne's poem called "The Language of Paradox.") Then, at the last possible moment, just when the text seems ready to crash into unresolvable chaos and the new critical method seems ready to collapse, the new critic rescues the critical method, and the text itself (and maybe the student critic's grade on a paper), by brilliantly pointing out how the balanced suspension of competing possibilities makes a larger argument about the relation between, in this case, two different kinds of love, or the mysteries and multiple possibilities of literary language, and perhaps even about poetry itself (or about fiction or drama or whatever genre of literature the critic is writing about). In this way, the new critics offered a systematic critical method, interpretations of individual texts, and also a claim that literary language itself depended on a balanced tension of ambiguity, irony, and paradox.

Patterns and symbols. In the process, two other characteristic strategies of new criticism emerged that later commentators have not called attention to as much as they have to paradox, ambiguity, tension, and irony, namely, the new critical preoccupations with **patterns** and symbols. We have already begun to see the new critical interest in patterns through the way that the new critics traced patterns of paradox, ambiguity, tension, and irony and discussed how the various conflicts balanced each other to form a unity. That interest drew on and contributed to a broader interest in literary patterns at large. Repetition makes patterns, whether for a predictable category like description (a color, perhaps), language (a favorite word or image), an event (such as scenes at a window or two characters repeatedly meeting), a habit (such as a character's repeated gesture), or a structural feature (such as chapters or scenes that begin in a similar way), and so on with endless possible variations. Most students and teachers of English have read or written literary criticism or sat through a class that traces a pattern across a work of literature. But the point is not just to say that the pattern is there; the point is to interpret the pattern. The interpretations vary as widely as the interpretive methods discussed throughout this book, but the habit of looking for patterns and treating them as evidence gained enormous momentum from new critical practice and from the new critical assumption that a repeating pattern indicated a unified artistic vision across the breadth of a literary text.

The new critics have no monopoly on **symbols,** but new critical practice fit snugly with an interest in symbols and helped expand that interest to the point that symbols became almost definitional of what many people think they are supposed to find in a literary text and what they expect to hear about from English classes and English teachers. The concept of symbols seems ready-made for new criticism because a repeated symbol (Hawthorne's scarlet letter, Herman Melville's great white whale, Samuel Beckett's Godot) makes a pattern and because patterns and symbols lend themselves to the new critics' commitment to interpretation. It has reached the point where we might say, without much fear of exaggeration, that generations of high school students and beginning college students terrified of their English classes have learned that the safe path through the gauntlet of interpretation is to play a game of *find the symbol.* If they fear their English class, they only need to find a symbol, and then everything will turn out O.K. We can often hear the pride in achievement when beginning students start to talk about symbols, and they deserve credit for learning the lesson that English teachers have taught them. But by the time students get to college—or beyond (for the symbol treasure hunt sometimes continues into graduate school and professional criticism)—they owe it to themselves to set a more challenging goal. The best criticism has little to do with that kind of symbol chasing, so it is now long past time for teachers to tell their students, at least once they get past high school, that the resort to symbols as a crank that they can turn to produce an interpretation has come to seem like a parody of literary criticism more than an enactment of literary criticism.

The problem comes in the assumption that a symbol bears a one-to-one relation to a meaning that it symbolizes. As it happens, such famous symbols as the scarlet letter and the great white whale bear anything but a one-to-one relation to their meaning, for in many ways the whole point of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick,* or *Waiting for Godot* is that readers cannot determine the meaning of the symbol, that it defies any one meaning. Moreover, it was exactly that ambiguity, that tension between competing meanings, that excited the new critics. The usual use of symbols in new critical writing, however, or perhaps even more in the imitators of new criticism, including the classroom discussions and the papers of generations of English classes, implies that a symbol expresses a single meaning that rescues us from the seething uncertainty of literary language, and in that way the usual search for symbols seems far too simple. Symbol hunting is

a travesty of the mysteries of literary meaning and even, arguably, an oversimplifying travesty of new criticism. The way most people use the word *symbol* seems to suggest that they think they have solved and done away with the mystery of a text, instead of helping us see and participate in its mystery.

HISTORICIZING THE NEW CRITICISM: RETHINKING LITERARY UNITY

Some of the new critics were friends, but they were not a set group or organized movement. They were mostly Americans and often Southerners, though the new criticism has loose analogues in other traditions, including French *explication de texte* and Russian formalism (discussed in Chapter 3).

Several influential British critics associated with Cambridge University, I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis, often attract comparison to the new critics. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929) influenced many new critical ideas. In *Practical Criticism*, Richards experimented with showing readers poems without the poets' names on them and then interpreting the readers' responses, a project that relates roughly to the new critical interest in focusing on the text itself more than on its cultural, historical, and biographical context. Empson's quirky *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), written while he was an undergraduate, influenced the new critics' sense of complex literary language. F. R. Leavis, working closely with Q. D. Leavis, called for a close scrutiny of literary works that in some ways parallels the new critics' interest in close reading. But F. R. Leavis was more concerned with the social role of literature than the new critics were, and his critical writing, rather than providing the close reading that the new critics called for, favored broadly impressionistic evaluations about which writers and works of literature are "great" and which are not great.

The best-known figures more directly associated with the new criticism include R. P. Blackmur, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate, as well as René Wellek and Austin Warren in a book called *Theory of Literature* (1949) that was often required or expected reading for English graduate students, though it gets little attention today. The term *new criticism* comes from the title of a 1941 book by Ransom. To my mind, however, the most influential new critics, through their critical, theoretical, and textbook writing, were Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 Cleanth Brooks (1906–1994) (left) and Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989), about 1980.

In 1938, Brooks and Warren published a revolutionary new critical textbook called *Understanding Poetry*, which went through many editions, and which they soon followed with *Understanding Fiction* (1943) and *Understanding Drama* (by Brooks and Robert B. Heilman, 1945). In later years, Warren would become the only writer to win Pulitzer prizes for both fiction and poetry, and he would serve as the first poet laureate of the United States. *Understanding Poetry* revolutionized the teaching of introductory poetry courses, but at first it met outraged resistance. Determined to teach the skills of close reading, Brooks and Warren organized their book according to principles of interpretation and poetic form, instead of according to the historical sequence of the poems and poets. To their detractors, they took the life out of literature by dehistoricizing it. To their advocates, they cut back the drab recitation of secondary background information and focused instead on the glories of the poems themselves and of the interpretation of poems. Their method came to represent the cutting edge of new criticism and gradually became the norm. For a generation or more, students trained through the *Understanding* books became the teachers of high school and college students and future

generations of teachers. Brooks also contributed two key books of new critical interpretation and theory, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) and *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947), which included his widely read essay on Donne's "The Canonization." Brooks's book takes its title from a phrase in "The Canonization" and perfectly expresses the characteristic new critical confidence in the polished completeness and unity of the works that new critics saw as great literature.

In seeing works of literature as complete, unified, and ripe for interpretation through close reading of the words on the page, through what they sometimes called "unpacking" the figurative language of paradox, ambiguity, tension, and irony, and through image patterns and symbols (see the list of key new critical concepts on p. 00), the new critics replaced predominantly historical criticism with what we call **formal** criticism or **formalism,** terms that sometimes confuse beginning students. To call new criticism formal does not mean that it is stuffy or wears an evening gown or a tux. It simply means that it focuses on the form of literary works, that is, on such matters as the literary structure and language. For the new critics, the focus on form meant a declining focus on history, cultural context, biography, and politics. The turn from history and culture is a lightning rod for the opponents of new criticism, who often misrepresent how the new critics actually understood the relation between literary interpretation and history and culture.

As readers will soon see, I can be highly critical of new criticism, but the common idea that new critics reject history and reject the study of the culture that literature comes from is so exaggerated that it is fair to say it is just plain wrong. They were extremely knowledgeable about history, and they often drew on literary and cultural history as background to their interpretations of literature. But they asked for criticism not to *focus* on history and culture. They asked for criticism to focus, instead, on the literature itself (those words on the page). In focusing on literature itself instead of on history or cultural context, they implied that literature has a relatively independent existence apart from its culture. In the wake of new criticism, for many critics an interest in formalism came to seem opposed to an interest in history and culture, an oversimplification as unfortunate as the mistaken idea that the new critics rejected history and culture. In any case, the turn away from history and culture, partial though it was, has stuck out notoriously for later generations of critics.

Indeed, from the perspective of a later time (a time that Brooks and Warren lived long enough to see), a time far more interested in

reading historically and culturally (as we will see later in this book), we can understand the new critics by reading them with the resources of an interest in history and culture. If we read them historically, we can see a relation between the new critics' interest in form and unity and their relative lack of interest in the relation between history or politics and literature. That requires characterizing the most influential new critics.

The most influential new critics, including Brooks, Warren, and Ransom, emerged out of a group of conservative American Southern, white male writers and cultural commentators at Vanderbilt University called the Fugitives (after their magazine, *The Fugitive*), who evolved into a group known as the Agrarians. In 1930, the Agrarians published *I'll Take My Stand* (Brooks was not a contributor, though he was close to the Agrarians), which attacked modernism and industrialism and called nostalgically for a return to the lost sense of community and harmony in the preindustrial, agrarian South.

This nostalgic view of the old South should, I think, give us pause. The old South romanticized by the Agrarians was not the long-standing center of Western humanism, harmony, and community that they imagined. Their imaginary vision drew on the wave of turn-of-the-century novels romanticizing the old South (soon to culminate in the novel and movie *Gone with the Wind*). But the old South was a land teetering on the edge of slave resistance and class conflict. The unsteady profits wreaked from that land, as the economy swung back and forth between frenzies of boom and bust, depended on the forced, unpaid labor of enslaved black people. And for much of the South (especially in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi), far more than most Americans realize, that economy fed off agricultural improvements made by American Indians and by black people held by Indians in slavery. Whites stole the Indian-owned farms while pressing the federal government to drive Indian people from their land. The old South was not the idyll of humanistic letters celebrated by the Agrarians. It was not, as they supposed, isolated from the market economy. Instead, it was a place of riotous land speculation where most people, black, white, and red, suffered horrendous poverty and had little or no access to books, and where an environmentally exploitive, revolving class of coastal entrepreneurs, who desperately painted themselves as patricians, and a newer set of inland upstarts eventually cobbled together a generation of shaky prosperity before the Civil War. The Agrarian movement, in short, was founded in self-serving delusion and denial.

In the community of shared values that the proto-new critical Agrarians imagined, people always knew their place and accepted their place, but when I look around at my students or family, I see hardly anyone whose ancestors fit into the imaginary world of the Agrarians. In short, scandalized by the social disunity they saw around them, they feared the dangers and excitements of modernity. The Agrarians called for us to return to a phony, fantasy past where people always knew and accepted their place, but where, in fact, only people like the Agrarians themselves might want to go. From there it appears that they projected their deluded vision of social unity, and of escape from the strife of contemporary culture, onto a model of literature and literary criticism that sought to prop up their ideal of harmonious unity and divorce it from the cultural and historical conflicts that threatened their privilege.

And so when the new critics see unity in the literary text, whose unity do they see? By choosing not to give weight to social issues, they deny—or we might even say suppress—the role of social conflict in literature, as if the symbols and patterns, the paradoxes, ambiguities, tensions, and ironies, were all about language in a tunnel-visioned way that isolates language from history and culture. On the contrary, the language and literary form that the new critics so lovingly caressed have everything to do with ideas and social meanings that the words in that language and form represent. And ideas and social meanings have everything to do with language, which we use partly to express them, including literary language. Readers and critics can choose to pay less attention to social meaning, but they cannot fence it into the mere background of literature. Even the new critics' effort to exile social meaning carries (ironically) a social meaning, for it suggests their fear of the changing social world, of conflicts across race, gender, and class. Their vision of unity has no place, literarily or socially, for most of the rest of us.

We might go so far as to question the cherished notion of literary unity altogether. Unity is not something *in* a text, intrinsic to a text, but something we project onto a text if we follow a method of reading, like the new critics' method, that seeks unity. Readers can find unity in any text, if they want to. Even if it is disunified, that is a kind of unity. Readers can always find some connection between different parts of a text, if they want to see them connected. After all, the new critics' almost-audible sighs of relief when they marshal the panoply of paradoxes, ambiguities, tensions, and ironies into an orderly balance to prop up organic unity should tell us just how precarious that

balance can look from another critical perspective. It might not look like balance at all. It might look like chaos—exactly what the new critics feared and sought to exile from the works they were willing to see as great art, as well as from their agrarian social fantasy.

When we see disunity in a work that someone else reads as unified, that disunity might come from a paradox, ambiguity, tension, or irony, or from a social conflict or a conflict of ideas, or from variations in form. Here, for example, a stanza of poetry rhymes, and there it doesn't rhyme. Here a line of poetry follows a perfect iambic rhythm, and there another line varies the rhythm. In one place a story relies on a character's perspective, but in another place it relies on an exterior narrator's perspective or the perspective of a dramatically different character. Here a play or a movie proceeds at a pace that makes the time on the stage or screen match the amount of time it portrays, but there it suddenly skips ten years. In one scene the cast faces the audience or the camera and the set shines with yellow light, but in another scene they face each other or the lighting bathes them in blue. Here a work uses colloquial language, and there it uses decorous, stately language, and somewhere else it mixes the colloquial and the stately, perhaps spicing them with shifts between italic and roman fonts, or shifting between dialogue and description, or jumbling together French and English. The possibilities that we can read as disunity are endless. And one instance of disunity will trump a pattern of unity, because as soon as we find one disunity, then we no longer have unity.

As readers, we can choose to put more weight on the unities than on the disunities, perhaps choosing to look at connections between different characteristics of a text more than we look at the disconnections, but that is a choice we make as readers. It is not an inherent, intrinsic property we discover in the text, but a preference we project onto a text.

Why care about the new critical infatuation with unity? Because the cultural habit of supposing that one goal of critical discussion must be to find the unity (like finding the symbol) hugely limits the possibilities for criticism, as we will see again when we get to deconstruction in Chapter 4. The critique of unity will also help prepare us to study deconstruction. (Indeed, readers experienced with later methods of criticism or readers who have skipped around in this book may hear the influence of reader-response criticism or deconstruction in this critique of the new critical notion of unity. While readers do not need experience with those later methods to follow this discussion, the critique of new criticism here gives a hint of things to come.)

In these ways, the critique of aesthetic unity goes hand in glove with the critique of the new critics' turn away from history and culture. To most contemporary critics, the new critical turn from history and culture did great damage to our sense of critical possibilities and even our sense of what literature we might read. The new critics could only sustain their notion of unity if they focused on literary works that allowed them to deny the social conflicts seething around them. That made it possible for them to sustain the historical preference of most white men of their time, education, and class for writing by other white men, to the exclusion of writing by the rest of the world. As the study of English has moved beyond new criticism, so also, in recent decades, has it vastly expanded the social range of the writers whose work critics and English classes read and study.

In the 1930s, when the new criticism emerged amidst the Great Depression and a fervor of political activity from both the left and the right, there was a burgeoning new interest in writing from beyond the traditional boundaries of race and class that had come to typify college reading lists. The new critics' narrower sense of what might make great literature helped put the brakes on that emerging receptiveness until the 1970s and 1980s. Meanwhile, their resistance to political interpretation, especially to Marxist or leftist interpretation, had a quietist, antipolitical cast that fit well with the conservative, anti-Communist America of the Cold War 1950s. That itself carries a certain irony, since the new critics' fantasy of a retreat from modernist industrialism and back to a lost idyll of agrarian harmony was anticapitalist, and the new critics might even seem like the intellectual outsiders that 1950s anti-Communist McCarthyites scorned. Still, by separating the study of literature from the unruly politics that readers often found in plays, novels, stories, and poems, the new critics managed to contain (in the Cold War sense of the term, meaning to contain or limit Communism) ideas about art, literature, and literary criticism that might disrupt conservative Cold War pieties. But as American politics changed with the rise of the civil rights movement, with the resistance to the war in Vietnam, and with the growth of feminism, students, teachers, and critics increasingly rejected the new critical impulse to separate literature from its social meaning.

We might wonder, in these contexts, whether the new criticism has grown so maligned that a book like this may no longer need a chapter on it; indeed, this chapter differs from the following chapters in that it explains a method of criticism that most college students and other readers of this book will in many ways already know,

even if they do not know that they know it. The later chapters, by contrast, will introduce methods of criticism that perhaps, with the partial exception of feminist criticism, are far less familiar to most readers. Because the new criticism now seems dated, I used to have a student or two in most critical theory classes suggest that we skip it to make more time for studying the later methods. Eventually I tried skipping it, and then many students complained that they missed it, because they saw how other methods defined themselves against the new criticism, and they believed—wisely, I think—that they would understand those later methods better if they also understood new criticism. As much as new criticism seems part of our past, therefore, it also has a way of hanging on and defining our present.

THE INTENTIONAL FALLACY AND THE AFFECTIVE FALLACY

Two additional concepts from new criticism, **the intentional fallacy** and **the affective fallacy,** attracted great interest, and both help us understand new critical assumptions. The critic William K. Wimsatt, a colleague of Brooks and Warren at Yale University, which became the hotbed of new criticism, and the philosopher of art Monroe C. Beardsley introduced these concepts in articles reprinted in Wimsatt's book *The Verbal Icon* (1954), a term that, like "the well-wrought urn," perfectly expresses the new critics' sense of the literary text or any other object of art as a self-sustaining artifact almost complete unto itself.

A fallacy is a mistaken (fallacious, false) idea or belief, or an error in reasoning. (If it helps, you can translate *fallacy* simply as "mistake.") The idea, once widely advertised, that smoking is good for our health is a fallacy, and it is fallacious to believe that if Jean is intelligent and good-looking and Terry is also good-looking, therefore Terry must also be intelligent. (Terry might be intelligent, but we would need something else to prove it.) *Affect* refers to emotions. (The word *affect* should not be confused with the word *effect*.) Wimsatt and Beardsley coined the term *the affective fallacy* to refer to what they saw as a logical error or mistaken belief about how we determine literary meaning. They argued that critics should not let their claims for the meaning of a literary text or other artistic object be determined by their emotions. As intrinsic critics, they believed that a text's meaning lies within the text itself, not in our response to it.

This is the opposite of the later approach sometimes called *reader-response criticism*, which assumes that we know a text only through

our response to it. (See Chapter 11.) Whether or not a text exists apart from our response to it (a separate philosophical question), we never experience the text as an intrinsic object independent of our response to it. Emotions (affects) are inevitably part of our response. For that reason, later critics usually reject the idea that an affect- or emotion-influenced response must be fallacious. They do not believe that we can respond to literature without including emotions in our response.

While the critique of the affective fallacy receives little if any support today, the critique of the intentional fallacy continues to wield a vast influence. Like most contemporary critics who feel a deep skepticism about the new critics, I nevertheless agree with their critique of the intentional fallacy. But for many students it remains a confusing idea, and so it will merit extended consideration here. Traditionally, critics simply took it for granted that one route to interpretation was to determine what the author of a text intended, and they took it for granted that there was a perfectly reciprocal link between the author's intention and the best interpretation. If we knew the best interpretation, then we could say that it expressed what the author intended. If we knew what the author intended, then we knew the best interpretation. Nobody questioned it, not even the early new critics.

But Wimsatt and Beardsley, drawing out the implications of the new critics' belief in the text as a verbal icon, and thus seeking an intrinsic criticism that relied on the text by itself, argued that it was fallacious to suppose that the author's intention and a good interpretation of the text are necessarily the same. While they did not object to critics considering what the author may have intended, as a way to raise possible interpretations that critics might not think of themselves, they still believed that any argument for an interpretation must come from the text itself.

Though not every critic has agreed that it is a fallacy to base a critical interpretation on what an author intended, the predominant movements in critical theory after the new criticism all agree that basing an interpretation on an author's intent is indeed a fallacy, even though they disagree about many other issues. To put it in a nutshell, they agree that what we think the author intended should not govern our interpretation of a literary text.

Putting the principle that way allows a certain nuance. It allows us to consider what we think the author intended as an aid to interpretation but not as a determinant of interpretation. It also hedges a key issue by saying "what we think the author intended," as opposed

to saying, simply, "what the author intended," and that is because we can never truly know what the author intended.

That argument leads us to some glimpses ahead to methods of criticism addressed in the later chapters of this book. While the methods described later in this book differ in a great variety of ways, they do not reach different conclusions about the intentional fallacy, even though they have a wide variety of reasons for continuing to believe that what we might think an author intended should not govern our interpretation.

The structuralists turned away from the traditional interest in individual authors and called for us to pay more attention to broader structures of language and culture, which have patterns and directions but do not have "intentions." The deconstructionists, who focus on multiplicity, would not grant the idea that an author has one particular intention, free of internal contradictions that might undermine any one intention with competing impulses in multiple directions. Like the new critics, the structuralists and deconstructionists advocate a formalism that calls for us to interpret the text itself, not the biography of its author.

Psychoanalytic criticism, with its belief in what it calls *the unconscious*, argues that a great many forces swirl through any given mind, including the mind of an author, including unconscious intentions that may differ dramatically from conscious intentions. In that context, what authors say, write, or even believe about their intentions may not accurately describe the most powerful impulses that direct their actions. And especially as psychoanalytic critics begin to combine psychoanalytic thinking with deconstruction, they may come to believe that intentions are often too multiple and contradictory to allow us to say, convincingly, that the authors' intentions were any one particular thing, let alone something conscious and visible to literary critics.

Feminist, queer studies, and Marxist critics as well as historical and cultural studies critics may point out ways that cultural assumptions influence writers' ideas independently of or even against what writers suppose they intend. According to all these methods, then, we often do not know what writers intend, and it often oversimplifies writers to believe that they have specific and complete intentions for every question we might ask about the works they write.

Sometimes it seems clear enough. We can probably agree that Emily Dickinson's intentions did not include flying to the moon. We can probably agree (though not everyone does) that she intended to write poems. We can probably agree that she sometimes intended to

write emotionally intense poems, and funny poems, and philosophical poems, as well as poems in ballad form (lines in iambic tetrameter alternating with lines in iambic trimeter), like the hymns that she grew up with. But sometimes it is not clear at all. It is much harder to say, with assurance, that she wrote "Further in summer than the birds" to teach her readers a reverence for nature. We might argue more successfully that the poem itself teaches such reverence, based on the new critical principle of evidence from the words on the page, with or without using later methods of criticism, as opposed to supposing that we can tell what Dickinson was thinking outside the poem, that those thoughts equal her intentions for the poem, and that the poem succeeds in fulfilling those intentions. Criticism based on what we suppose the author intended can end up looking more like biography than like literary criticism. Biography has its own value, and it can overlap with literary criticism, but it is not literary criticism.

Nevertheless, the cultural habit of supposing that we can know, and usually do know, what authors intend and that their intentions should govern our interpretation of their writing is so strong, has come to seem so intuitive, that the critique of the intentional fallacy usually takes a lot of getting used to. And the truth is that it takes a lot of getting used to for professional critics as well as for students. Many professional critics slide easily into the habit of taking the intentional fallacy for granted, even when they do not mean to. Even the early new critics, before Wimsatt and Beardsley, routinely referred to the author's intention, without thinking about it or realizing that such references might undermine their notion of concentrating on the text itself. Even when we say something like "Hemingway simplifies his language to" do this or that, the phrase "to . . . " suggests that we know the author's intention and that the author's intention can determine our interpretation.

Let me give an example from my own teaching that can help illustrate ways to think about authorial intention. One morning, I was teaching Walt Whitman's "Beat! Beat! Drums!" for a survey class in early American literature. I knew my stuff—or so I thought. I knew the poem, the history around it, the biography around it. I knew that Whitman wrote it in 1861 as a call to arms at the beginning of the Civil War. In today's lingo, we might call it a pro-war poem. Here is how the poem begins (and it continues on in the same vein):

> Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
> Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,
> Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,

Into the school where the scholar is studying;
Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have now with his bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you bugles blow.
(Whitman 419)

One of the students started discussing the poem as an antiwar poem. I knew it was not an antiwar poem. I knew that in 1861 Whitman fervently supported the war, and so I knew that the student was wrong. I didn't want to say, "You are wrong," fearing that that would hurt the student and frighten the other students, so I asked, "What do other people think?" I was confident that another student would have the right answer and correct the first student. The next student chimed in with enthusiasm, but to my astonishment the second student agreed with the first student, and then a third student, and then a fourth. By this point, I knew I was in trouble, especially because each student came up with specific evidence from the poem itself. With new criticism in the back of my mind, I had tried to teach the value of close reading with evidence from the text, and the students had learned their lesson well. Look at the terrible things that the war is doing in the poem, they noted. It bursts. It is ruthless and forceful. It disrupts the church and the congregants. It disrupts the school and robs happiness from a new marriage, and so on. All these are terrible things, the students argued, with perfect plausibility, and so the poem must be protesting the war.

To my mind, the students' post-Vietnam War way of thinking kept them from seeing that Whitman was saying that all these seemingly terrible things were actually good because they gave us a noble and needed war that he thought the United States would win in a few glorious weeks. I found myself wanting to tell the students that they were wrong and that I knew they were wrong because I knew what Whitman intended, but I also knew that that was a feeble argument against the excellent evidence that students had offered. I didn't know what to do, and to tell the truth I cannot remember what I did. But whatever it was, it went badly, and I let the students down.

Since then, I have thought a lot about that bad day in the classroom, and the picture has grown more complicated and interesting than a mere story of shoddy teaching. Whitman first published this poem in an 1861 newspaper. Later, as the war continued, he kept writing war poems, and they changed a great deal in mood and manner as the war's brutality deepened and dragged on and as Whitman saw the

war's devastation up close, working intimately to nurse the wounded and dying. After the war, in 1865, he gathered his war poems into a volume called *Drum-Taps*, and he put "Beat! Beat! Drums!," his first war poem, written as a pro-war poem, near the beginning of the volume.

"Beat! Beat! Drums!" can thus challenge any confidence in the traditional idea that we can say what an author intended and use that intention to govern our interpretation of a text. For it seems that Whitman published the poem in 1861 with one intention and then published it again in 1865 with another, opposite intention. After the horrors of the Civil War, which his poems evoke so movingly, the textual details that my students called attention to take on a different meaning from the one that I had seen in the poem or that Whitman seems to have seen in 1861. It seems that in 1861, his poem anticipated possibilities for the meaning of its language beyond those meanings he seems to have been conscious of. In short, Whitman seems to have had more than one intention for "Beat! Beat! Drums!" He not only had different intentions at different times, but in some sense he seems also to have had different intentions at the same time, including latent antiwar impulses in 1861 and a willingness in 1865 to look back at his pro-war intentions and expose them to the scrutiny of his later understanding.

In this way, Whitman's poem, my students' insights, and my sorry effort to teach the poem can suggest the oversimplification inherent in the usual confidence that we can identify a specific authorial intention and then use that intention to determine our interpretation of a literary text. Intentions often come in such multiple and self-contradictory ways that they give the lie to any one overall notion of "authorial intention," and they may or may not match what a text actually produces, which is likely to be as multiple and as susceptible to contradictory readings as the intentions that may or may not lie behind them. As it turns out, most of the time when critics slip into reasoning from authorial intention, they simply take an interpretation they like, suppose that it matches what the author intended, and then use the supposition about intention as evidence to back up the interpretation. That slippery series of suppositions can deter them from coming up with actual evidence for their interpretation.

When students first encounter the critique of basing interpretations on authorial intentions, they often feel at a loss. What is literature about, if it is not about determining what the author intended? How can we find evidence, if the author's intentions do not qualify as evidence? Those questions are not so hard to answer, once we think

about them. Literature may relate to its writer's personal history, but it is not the same as the personal history. So the evidence must come from the literature. Perhaps it need not come from the literature all by itself. It may come from the literature in relation to the writer's life story (as we have seen with Whitman) and in relation to many of the other things that we will study later in this book (gender, history, economics, and so on), but we still need evidence from the literature if we want to back up a claim about the literature.

It can help if we shift one of the usual questions that students ask (and that critics and teachers ask). The question often goes like this: What was she or he (the author) trying to do? For example, what was William Faulkner trying to do by telling the beginning of *The Sound and the Fury* through the mind of a so-called idiot, an adult whose intelligence has not grown beyond that of a small child? Or what was Gertrude Stein trying to do by repeating the same phrases so many times? Why did Chaucer use talking animals to tell "The Nun's Priest's Tale," or why did e. e. cummings splatter his lines of poetry in fragments across the page? When students ask what the author was trying to do, they usually hit a wall. They feel stumped, or they leap to claims that they cannot back up, and then they feel defeated. I propose that instead of asking why the author did this or that, we ask *what is the effect of* this or that. Students who feel defeated by the question about intentions usually come up with a flood of insight, interpretation, and evidence as soon as we shift the question from what the author was trying to do to what is the effect of what the author (or text) actually does.

The debate over the intentional fallacy has exerted considerable influence in areas outside literary studies. Legal theorists often ask what the writers of the United States Constitution, or the writers of a particular piece of legislation, intended. They debate whether we can know that intention and whether what we suppose we know about their intention should influence how we interpret the laws they wrote. Should we confine ourselves to the meanings the Constitution had in 1789, when in most states only propertied white men could vote, or should the words carry different meanings in the changed world we read them from today? If the meaning can change, then how do we determine the changing meaning? Similarly, we often ask how we can interpret each other's actions. If someone hurts someone else but we believe that that person did not intend to hurt anyone, then should we still condemn, either legally or ethically, the person who hurt someone else? Should we forgive? Should we blame? The study of critical theory can help us ask these difficult questions and think through our answers, even when we disagree.

Common Misunderstandings

- It is often said that the new critics believed that literary criticism should not address history, culture, politics, and so on. But the new critics never said that and resented being criticized for saying it. They were deeply knowledgeable about and interested in history, culture, and politics, and they often addressed such topics as part of the *background* for literary criticism, but they did not believe that such topics should be a *focus* for literary criticism.
- It is sometimes said that the new critics wrote mostly about poetry and took little interest in fiction or drama. While most of the early new critical writing focused on poetry and often on the close study of language that we associate with studies of poetry, the new criticism grew so standard that it came to dominate the criticism of fiction and drama as well, though new critics used language-focused terms like *paradox* and *tension* less often when they wrote about fiction and drama and focused more on patterns of character.
- It is often said that the new critics believed there is only one correct interpretation. While, like other critics, they worked hard to back up their own interpretations, and they believed that their method of interpretation was the best method, they did not banish other views of individual works of literature, and indeed their focus on ambiguity can encourage competing interpretations.

HOW TO INTERPRET: A NEW CRITICAL EXAMPLE

Let us look at a more extended example of how new critics might read. A new critic would likely see an abundance of paradox, ambiguity, tension, and possibly irony in Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" (1919):

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was grey and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.
(Stevens 76)

A new critic might ponder the ambiguity of "in Tennessee." Typically, we place a jar *on* something, perhaps on a table, a counter, or a shelf. If we place it *in* something, then we place it in something like a pantry or a refrigerator. But Tennessee seems almost paradoxically too broad and unspecified a space for an act as concrete, mundane, and small as placing a jar. The jar emerges as a symbol. It changes the world around it, imposing order on the "wild" and "slovenly wilderness." It seems crafted. As a synthetic object, then, it can symbolize art. The ambiguous little jar grows into something paradoxically, even ironically, grand, perhaps so grand that it is "like nothing else in Tennessee," a state not terribly associated with the history and lore of the fine arts. Ringing with the echoing sound of extended, lengthy syllables in "round," "surround," and "ground," the jar looms "tall and"—in a strangely exalted locution—"of a port in air," so much that "It took dominion everywhere." Yet as a mundane object, "grey and bare" in "the wilderness," this out-of-place synthetic intruder can also suggest something more ordinary. Even the line that speaks of it as "grey and bare" enacts the spareness that it describes by squeezing its thoughts into one-syllable words (like only two other lines in the poem) and ending abruptly, metrically after only three iambic feet, when all but one of the other lines have four feet.

On the one hand, then, the jar symbolizes the exalted grandeur of art, and on the other hand, it suggests trash, even litter. As litter, it cannot "give of," or seems frighteningly dissociated from yet still in the midst of, the surrounding natural world of "bird or bush." A sustained tension between these two opposite possibilities suspends the poem in a lyrically balanced evocation of opposite poles in the human imagination, perhaps suggesting or even symbolizing the vulnerability of art and the potential beauty and grandeur of ordinary things.

In proposing such a reading, I have not asked what we think Stevens might have intended. Nor have I gone much into history, apart from noticing, at the risk of snobbery, a little about the