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## Everything you wanted to know about critical theory but were afraid to ask

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Why should we bother to learn about critical theories? Is it really worth the trouble? Won't all those abstract concepts (if I can even understand any of them) interfere with my natural, personal interpretations of literature? These questions, or ones like them, are probably the questions most frequently asked by new students of critical theory, regardless of their age or educational status, and such questions reveal the two-fold nature of our reluctance to study theory: (1) fear of failure and (2) fear of losing the intimate, exciting, magical connection with literature that is our reason for reading it in the first place. I think both these fears are well founded.

With notable exceptions, most theoretical writing—by the big names in the field and by those who attempt to explain their ideas to novices—is filled with technical terms and theoretical concepts that assume a level of familiarity newcomers simply don't have. And because such writing doesn't seem to connect with our love of literature, let alone with the everyday world we live in, it seems that theory's purpose must be to take us into some abstract, intellectual realm in which we try to impress one another by using the latest theoretical jargon (which we hope our peers haven't heard yet) and dropping the names of obscure theorists (whom we hope our peers haven't read yet). In other words, because knowledge of critical theory has become, over the last decade or so, a mark of status, an educational "property" for which students and professors compete, it has also become a costly commodity that is difficult to acquire and to maintain at the state of the art.

Indeed, I think the anxiety that most of us bring to our study of critical theory is due largely to our initial encounters with theoretical jargon or, more accurately, with people who use theoretical jargon to inflate their own status. To cite just one example, a student recently asked me what "*the death of the author*" means.

He'd heard the phrase bandied about, but no one explained it to him, so he felt excluded from the conversation. Because the meaning of the phrase wasn't evident in the context in which he'd heard it used, the student felt that it must be a complex concept. Because those who used the phrase acted as though they belonged to an elite club, at the same time as they pretended that everyone knew what it meant, he felt stupid for not knowing the term and, therefore, afraid to ask about it, afraid to reveal his stupidity. In fact, "the death of the author" is a simple concept, but unless someone explains it to you the phrase makes little sense. "The death of the author" merely refers to the change in attitude toward the role of the author in our interpretation of literary works. In the early decades of the twentieth century, students of literature were taught that the author was our primary concern in reading a literary work: our task was to examine the author's life in order to discover what the author meant to communicate—his or her message, theme, or moral—which is called *authorial intention*. Our focus has changed over the years to the point that, now, among many contemporary critical theorists at least, the author is no longer considered a meaningful object of analysis. We focus, instead, on the reader; on the ideological, rhetorical, or aesthetic structure of the text; or on the culture in which the text was produced, usually without reference to the author. So, for all intents and purposes, the author is "dead." It's a simple idea, really, yet, like many ideas that belong to a particular academic discipline, it can be used to exclude people rather than to communicate with them. This situation is especially objectionable because it results in the exclusion of those of us who might stand to benefit from critical theory in the most concrete ways: current and future teachers at the elementary and secondary levels; faculty and students at community colleges; and faculty and students in all departments at the thousands of liberal arts colleges responsible for the bulk of American education but whose members may not be on the "fast track" to academic stardom.

What are the concrete ways in which we can benefit from an understanding of critical theory? As I hope the following chapters will illustrate, theory can help us learn to see ourselves and our world in valuable new ways, ways that can influence how we educate our children, both as parents and teachers; how we view television, from the nightly news to situation comedies; how we behave as voters and consumers; how we react to others with whom we do not agree on social, religious, and political issues; and how we recognize and deal with our own motives, fears, and desires. And if we believe that human productions—not just literature but also, for example, film, music, art, science, technology, and architecture—are outgrowths of human experience and therefore reflect human desire, conflict, and potential, then we can learn to interpret those productions in order to learn something important about ourselves as a species. Critical theory, I think you will find, provides excellent tools for that endeavor, tools that

not only can show us our world and ourselves through new and valuable lenses but also can strengthen our ability to think logically, creatively, and with a good deal of insight.

To that end, each chapter will explain the basic principles of the theory it addresses in order to enable you to read what the theorists themselves have written. Each chapter will focus on a critical theory that has had a significant impact on the practice of literary criticism today and will attempt to show the world through the lens of that theory. Think of each theory as a new pair of eye-glasses through which certain elements of our world are brought into focus while others, of course, fade into the background. Did that last idea give you pause, I hope? Why should some ideas have to fade into the background in order to focus on others? Doesn't this suggest that each theory can offer only an incomplete picture of the world?

It seems unavoidable, and part of the paradox of seeing and learning is that in order to understand some things clearly we must restrict our focus in a way that highlights certain elements and ignores others, just as the close-up camera crystallizes whatever it frames and renders the rest a blurred background. Perhaps this is why, for example, science and religion often seem so at odds, not just because they often offer conflicting explanations of the same phenomena but because they focus our vision on different dimensions of our own experience. This is why it seems to me so important that we study a number of theories in succession, not just to remind ourselves that multiple viewpoints are important if we are to see the whole picture but to grasp the very process of understanding that underlies human experience and to thereby increase our ability to see both the value and the limitations of every method of viewing the world. In fact, one of the most important things theory can show us is that methodologies *are* ways of seeing the world, whether we're talking about physics or sociology, literature, or medicine.

Indeed, because they are ways of seeing the world, critical theories compete with one another for dominance in educational and cultural communities. Each theory offers itself as the most (or the only) accurate means of understanding human experience. Thus, competition among theories has always had a strong political dimension in at least two senses of the word *political*: (1) different theories offer very different interpretations of history and of current events, including interpretations of government policies, and (2) advocates of the most popular theories of the day usually receive the best jobs and the most funding for their projects.

Even within the ranks of any given critical theory there are countless disagreements among practitioners that result in the emergence of different schools of thought within a single theory. In fact, the history of every critical theory is, in

effect, the history of an ongoing debate among its own advocates as well as an ongoing debate with the advocates of other theories. However, before you can understand an argument, you have to understand the language or languages in which the opponents express their ideas. By familiarizing you with the language each theory speaks—that is, with the key concepts on which each theory is grounded—this book will prepare you to understand the ongoing debates both within and among critical theories. Learning to use the different languages of theory offered here will also accustom you to “thinking theoretically,” that is, to seeing the assumptions, whether stated or not, that underlie every viewpoint.

For example, as you read the following chapters, I hope it will become clear to you that even our “personal,” “natural” interpretations of literature and of the world we live in—interpretations “unsullied” by theory—are based on assumptions, on ways of seeing the world, that are themselves theoretical and that we don’t realize we’ve internalized. In other words, there is no such thing as a nontheoretical interpretation. We may not be aware of the theoretical assumptions that guide our thinking, but those assumptions are there nevertheless. For example, why do we assume that the proper way to interpret a story for an English class is to show how images and metaphors convey ideas and feelings or how the story illustrates a theme or reflects some aspect of history or communicates the author’s viewpoint? Why isn’t the proper response, instead, to do volunteer work at a shelter for the homeless, sculpt a statue, or throw a party? In other words, the interpretations of literature we produce before we study critical theory may seem completely personal or natural, but they are based on beliefs—beliefs about literature, about education, about language, about selfhood—that permeate our culture and that we therefore take for granted.

I hope you will also find, once you’ve become better acquainted with critical theory, that it increases rather than decreases your appreciation of literature. Think back to your junior high or high school experiences as a reader. Can you remember a story or two, or a novel or play, that you just loved or just hated, yet when you read it again a few years later your reaction had significantly changed? The more we experience in life, the more we are capable of experiencing in literature. So as you grow in your capacity to understand theory, to think more broadly and more deeply about human experience and the world of ideas, the more you will be capable of appreciating the rich density, the varied texture and shades of meaning, available in literary works. It’s possible that an old favorite might fall by the wayside, but you’ll have new favorites, and you’ll have the capacity to see more and therefore appreciate more in everything you read.

In order to illustrate the various ways in which different critical theories interpret literature, each chapter will include, in addition to short examples drawn from different literary texts, a fully developed reading of the same work: F. Scott

Fitzgerald’s well-known novel *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the following chapters is primarily literary for two reasons: (1) I assume that most readers will approach critical theory as students or teachers of literature, and (2) literature, conceived as a “laboratory” of human life, provides examples of human experience presumably common to all readers.

Why *The Great Gatsby* and not some other literary work? I did not choose Fitzgerald’s novel because I think you will find it necessarily a great work or even an enjoyable work, although many readers consider it both. I chose it because it lends itself well to the critical theories we are studying. Although, hypothetically at least, every literary work can be interpreted using every critical framework, most works lend themselves more readily to some frameworks than to others, and the attempt to read a text using an incompatible framework can be a relatively fruitless endeavor that risks distorting elements of the text, the theory, or both, as we try to make them fit each other. It’s a judgment call, of course, and readers will differ as to which theories they are able to fruitfully apply to which literary works. Our task, then, is to know our own strengths and limitations as well as those of the theories we employ, even as we work to increase our ability to use theories.

Another fact to keep in mind as we apply critical theories to *The Great Gatsby* and as you begin to use them to read other literary works is that different theoretical interpretations of the same literary work can bring forth very different views of the work, focusing on different characters and different parts of the plot or generating opposing views of the same characters and events. Theories can also overlap a good deal with one another, producing very compatible, even similar, readings of the same work. Critical theories are not isolated entities, completely different from one another, separable into tidy bins, like the tubs of tulips, daffodils, and carnations we see at the florist. It would be more useful to think of theories, to continue the metaphor, as mixed bouquets, each of which can contain a few of the flowers that predominate in or that serve different purposes in other bouquets.

Thus, for example, while Marxism focuses on the socioeconomic considerations that underlie human behavior, it doesn’t exclude the psychological domain of human experience; rather, when it addresses human psychology, it does so in order to demonstrate how psychological experience is produced by socioeconomic factors rather than by the causes usually posited by psychoanalysis. Similarly, while feminist analysis often draws on psychoanalytic and Marxist concepts, it uses them to illuminate feminist concerns: for example, to examine the ways in which women are psychologically and socioeconomically oppressed. And even when critics use the same theoretical tools to read the same literary work, they might produce very different interpretations of that work. Using the

same theory doesn't necessarily mean reading the literary work in the same way. If you read other critics' interpretations of *The Great Gatsby*, you will probably find that they agree with my interpretations on some points and disagree on others even when we seem to be using the same critical tools.

At this point, a brief explanation of a few important concepts might be useful. I refer above to other "critics," and it's important to remind ourselves that the terms *critic* and *literary criticism* don't necessarily imply finding fault with literary works. Literary criticism, by and large, tries to explain the literary work to us: its production, its meaning, its design, its beauty. Critics tend to find flaws in one another's interpretations more than in literary works. Unlike movie critics and book reviewers, who tell us whether or not we should see the films or read the books they review, literary critics spend much more time explaining than evaluating, even when their official purpose, like that of the New Critics described in chapter 5, is to assess the aesthetic quality of the literary work. Of course, when we apply critical theories that involve a desire to change the world for the better—such as feminism, Marxism, African American criticism, lesbian/gay/queer criticism, and postcolonial criticism—we will sometimes find a literary work flawed in terms of its deliberate or inadvertent promotion of, for example, sexist, classist, racist, heterosexist, or colonialist values. But even in these cases, the flawed work has value because we can use it to understand how these repressive ideologies operate.

*Critical theory* (or *literary theory*), on the other hand, tries to explain the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism rest. Strictly speaking, when we interpret a literary text, we are doing literary criticism; when we examine the criteria upon which our interpretation rests, we are doing critical theory. Simply put, literary criticism is the application of critical theory to a literary text, whether or not a given critic is aware of the theoretical assumptions informing her or his interpretation. In fact, the widespread recognition that literary criticism cannot be separated from the theoretical assumptions on which it is based is one reason why the word *criticism* is often used as if it included the word *theory*.

Examples of critical theory include Jacques Derrida's essays on his deconstructive theory of language; Louise Rosenblatt's definitions of *text*, *reader*, and *poem*; and even my attempts in the following chapters to explain the operations of and relationships among theoretical concepts from various critical schools. Examples of literary criticism would include a deconstructive interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a Marxist analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), a gay reading of the imagery in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855), and the various interpretations of *The Great Gatsby* offered in the following chapters.

Despite their tendency to interpret rather than to evaluate literature, literary critics have an enormous effect on the literary marketplace, not in terms of what they say about particular works but in terms of which works they choose to interpret and which works they ignore. And of course, critics tend to interpret works that lend themselves readily to the critical theory they employ. Thus, whenever a single critical theory dominates literary studies, those works that lend themselves well to that theory will be considered "great works" and will be taught in the college classroom, while other works will be ignored. Because most of us who become teachers tend to teach the works we were taught, a popular critical theory can result in the institutionalization, or *canonization*, of certain literary works: those works then are taught to successive generations of students as "great works" with "timeless" appeal.

The last concept I want to discuss with you, before explaining how this book is organized, might be called *reading "with the grain" or "against the grain"* of a literary work. When we read with the grain of a literary work, we interpret the work the way it seems to invite us to interpret it. For example, the Marxist interpretation of *The Great Gatsby* in chapter 3 reads with the grain of the story to the extent that it clarifies the ways in which the text itself explicitly condemns the superficial values that put social status above every other concern. In contrast, that same interpretation reads against the grain of the story when it seeks to show the ways in which the novel, apparently unwittingly, actually promotes the values it clearly wants to condemn. Thus, when we read against the grain, we analyze elements in the text of which the text itself seems unaware. To give another example, because *The Great Gatsby* explicitly shows that Tom, Daisy, and Myrtle are hardly ideal spouses, our psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel in chapter 2 reads with the grain—interprets the novel the way it seems to invite us to interpret it—when our interpretation suggests that these characters are not really in love with their mates. However, because the novel presents Gatsby's love for Daisy in such a traditional romantic manner—Nick says that Gatsby "committed himself" to Daisy as "to the following of a grail" (156; ch. 8), and Gatsby ends up sacrificing his life for her—our psychoanalytic interpretation may be said to read against the grain when it argues that his feelings for Daisy are as far from real love as those of the other characters. This latter interpretation of Gatsby is one of which the novel seems unaware, given the ways in which the work portrays Gatsby's devotion to Daisy in contrast to the shallow relationships of the other characters.

Reading with the grain thus implies seeing what the author intended us to see, while reading against the grain implies seeing something the author didn't intend, something of which he or she was unaware. However, we generally talk about what the text intends, rather than about what the author intended. As the New Critics observed, we can't always know what the author intended, and even

if authors say what they intended, the literary work might fail to live up to that intention or might go beyond it. Of course, some critics do choose to talk about the author's intention, and they shoulder the burden of providing biographical arguments to try to convince us that they're right. By the same token, talking about what the text intends doesn't guarantee that our analysis is correct; we still must provide evidence from the text to support our view. In any event, any given theory can read with or against the grain of any literary work at any given point in the text. It's usually important to know whether we're reading with or against the grain so that we don't, for example, condemn a literary work for its portrayal of sexist behavior when that very portrayal is given in order to condemn sexism. Like many elements of literary interpretation, this is a sticky one, and readers often disagree about what a work invites us to see and what it does not.

While such issues are important, at this point in time they shouldn't concern you too much. For now, just let them float around in the back of your mind as you read through the chapters that follow. Indeed, I think this book will do its job best if you read it for interest and enjoyment rather than in hopes of becoming a master theoretician who understands everything. For one thing, reading this book won't make you a master theoretician who understands everything. Of course, there's no such creature. And the book you have in your hands is only an introduction to critical theory, a first step into what I hope will be a long and enriching process. While this book will acquaint you with what many of us consider the most well-known and useful theories, there are many other theories not offered here. Having read this book, however, you should be ready to read about additional theories on your own if you're interested, and you should also be ready to read more about the theories covered here if you find you have a particular interest in some of them.

To help you attain that readiness, each chapter begins with an explanation of the theory in question in plain English, drawing on examples from everyday experience and well-known literary works to clarify key points. To help you look at literature the way a theorist might, each chapter also contains a list of general questions such as theorists ask about literary works. Then, as a specific illustration, an interpretation of Fitzgerald's novel through the lens of the theory at hand follows. Next, you will find questions for further practice, which serve as guides to applying the theory under consideration to other literature. These questions (which also can function as paper topics) attempt to focus your attention on specific theoretical concepts illustrated in specific literary works. Most of these works are frequently anthologized and appear often on college syllabi, but you or your instructor might want to apply the questions to different pieces of literature. Finally, in case you would like to learn more about a particular theory, each chapter closes with a bibliography of theoretical works, "For Further Reading" and "For Advanced Readers," that will serve as a useful follow-up to what you

have just learned. Chapter 13, "Gaining an Overview," offers you a way to clarify and organize your thoughts about the critical theories discussed in this textbook by providing questions—one for each theory—that each represent the general focus, a kind of bird's-eye view, of each school of criticism. In addition, chapter 13 attempts to explain how theories reflect the history and politics of the culture that produces them and how different theories can be used in conjunction to produce a single interpretation of a literary work.

It might also be helpful to know that the theories we will examine are presented in logical sequence rather than in strict chronological order.<sup>2</sup> We will begin with those theories I think you will find most accessible and most clearly related to our everyday world and then move to others in terms of some logical connection among them, so that you can see theories as overlapping, competing, quarrelling visions of the world rather than as tidy categories. Thus, we will begin with a chapter on psychoanalytic criticism because most of us have been exposed to some psychoanalytic concepts in our daily lives, albeit as clichéd commonplaces, and because psychoanalysis draws on personal experiences to which most of us can very readily relate. A chapter on Marxist criticism immediately follows because Marxism both overlaps and argues with psychoanalysis. Feminism follows these theories because it both draws on and argues with psychoanalytic and Marxist concepts. And so on. Although historical categories will not provide our main organizing principle, historical relationships among theories (for example, how New Criticism was a reaction against traditional historicism or how deconstruction was a reaction against structuralism) will be explained because such relationships can clarify some of the theoretical concepts we're using and some of the ways in which, as noted earlier, the struggle for intellectual dominance is also a struggle for economic, social, and political dominance.

Let me close with a personal anecdote that you might find relevant to your initial encounter with critical theory. When I first read Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play"—possibly the most widely reprinted introduction to his theory of deconstruction—I was sitting in my '64 Chevy, stuck in a parking lot during a violent thunderstorm. I was just beginning to learn about critical theory, and my reaction to the essay was a burst of tears, not because I was moved by the essay or by the sublime nature of the thunderstorm but because I couldn't understand what I'd just read. I'd thought, until then, that I was very intelligent: I'd studied philosophy diligently in college, and I was a great "decoder" of dense, difficult writing. "So why can't I understand this essay?" I wondered. "Am I a good deal less intelligent than I'd thought?" (Sound familiar?) I finally learned that my problem was not with the complexity of Derrida's ideas, though they are complex, but with their unfamiliarity. There seemed to be nothing in my experience up to that point to enable me to relate his ideas to anything I already knew. I had no road map. I was lost. I think this experience is common for students

approaching any new theory (not just deconstruction). We simply don't know how to get there from here.

In a very real sense, then, what I'm offering you in the following chapters is a road map. And I think the journey metaphor is appropriate for our endeavor here. For knowledge isn't something we acquire: it's something we are or something we hope to become. Knowledge is what constitutes our relationship to ourselves and to our world, for it is the lens through which we view ourselves and our world. Change the lens and you change both the view and the viewer. This principle is what makes knowledge at once so frightening and so liberating, so painful and so utterly, utterly joyful. If this book can help you discover that the joy is worth the pain and that the pain itself is honorable—if it can help you value your initial fear and confusion as signs that you've taken your first big step into an unfamiliar territory worthy of the work required to explore it—then it will have accomplished something important.

## Notes

1. References to *The Great Gatsby* are cited parenthetically throughout this textbook and refer to the 1992 edition of the novel published by Macmillan (with notes and preface by Matthew J. Bruccoli). Parenthetical references include page numbers as well as chapter to aid those readers using a different edition of the novel.
2. In studying critical theory, adherence to a strict chronological order would pose problems even if we wanted to achieve it. Perhaps the most pressing problem is that the chronological order in which theories appeared in academia differs from their chronological order if looked at from a broader historical perspective. For example, if we wanted to use academic history as our principle of organization, this book probably would begin with New Criticism (chapter 5), the academic origins of which can be found in the 1920s, although New Criticism's domination of academia didn't begin until after World War II. If we wanted to use history in the broader sense of the word as our principle of organization, then this book probably would begin with feminism (chapter 4), which one could argue began with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) or perhaps even earlier. While I do adhere to what I believe is a logical order in the presentation of chapters, please note that chronology is not abandoned, merely reconsidered. In addition to being foundational in nature, the first three theories presented—psychoanalysis, Marxism, and feminism—historically precede New Criticism, which is the next chapter offered. Chapters on the remaining theories follow in a chronological order based, for the most part, on the period during which each theory achieved an important, widespread presence in academia.

## Works cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. New York: Macmillan, 1992.