



Unifying the Work

New Criticism

The study of literature means the study of literature, not of biography nor of literary history (incidentally of vast importance), not of grammar, not of etymology, not of anything except the works themselves, viewed as their creators wrote them, viewed as art, as transcripts of humanity—not as logic, not as psychology, not as ethics.

—Martin Wright Sampson

THE PURPOSE OF NEW CRITICISM

For much of the previous century, “traditional” criticism was in large part synonymous with what has become known as “New Criticism.” This way of looking at literature began to emerge clearly in the 1920s and dominated literary criticism from the late 1930s into the 1960s. In 1941, John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism* gave this movement its name (even though the point of Ransom’s book, ironically, is that *the* New Critic had not appeared). Its effects continue even to the present day, when it might better be called “the old New Criticism.” Although those who have been called “New Critics” have not agreed in every respect, and some have even rejected the title, it is possible to identify a number of fundamental assumptions shared by an enormous number of critics and teachers and their students. The odds, in fact, are excellent that some of your English teachers were trained in the methods of New Criticism, even if they never heard the term; and in surprisingly many classrooms today, even in the midst of a cornucopia of critical options, New Criticism is often

essentially the only approach on the menu, its principles so pervasive that they seem natural and obvious—and therefore remain, often enough, unarticulated.

Basic Principles Reflected

One way to get at these principles, and begin to see why they have remained so appealing, might be to look at a famous poem written about the time that New Criticism was emerging as a critical force. This poem is of particular interest because it is about poetry, attempting to define it, advising us how to view it. Thus it seeks to provide a kind of guide for criticism: “Here is what poetry ought to be,” the poem says; “read it with these standards in mind.” Widely anthologized in introduction-to-literature texts since its appearance, the poem not only reflects the ideas of a nascent New Criticism, but it also probably helped to promote those ideas over several generations. Read it through carefully a few times, noting any questions or confusions that arise. It will be discussed in detail below.

Ars Poetica *Archibald MacLeish*

A poem should be palpable and mute As a globed fruit,	
Dumb As old medallions to the thumb,	
Silent as the sleeve-worn stone Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—	5
A poem should be wordless As the flight of birds.	
A poem should be motionless in time As the moon climbs,	10
Leaving, as the moon releases Twig by twig the night-entangled trees, Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves, Memory by memory the mind—	
A poem should be motionless in time As the moon climbs.	15
A poem should be equal to: Not true.	

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf. 20

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.

(1926)

The poem is startling from its opening lines, asserting that a poem should be “palpable and mute.” How can a poem possibly be “palpable,” or “capable of being handled, touched, or felt” (*American Heritage Dictionary*)? Whether we think of a poem as an idea, or a group of ideas, or the writing on a piece of paper, or a group of spoken words, none of these seems to be the sort of thing we can handle. And how can a poem be “mute”? Isn’t a poem made of words? Don’t we at least imagine a voice speaking the words? Suggesting that a poem be mute seems a bit like suggesting that a movie be invisible, or a song be inaudible, or a sculpture be without shape.

But MacLeish reiterates these ideas in subsequent lines, saying explicitly that a poem should be “Dumb,” “Silent,” and (most amazingly) “wordless” (lines 3, 5, and 7). He uses comparisons that reinforce particularly the idea of being “palpable.” In comparing the poem to a “fruit,” for instance, MacLeish suggests that the poem should be a real thing, having substance. The idea that it should be “globed” (a “globed fruit”) emphasizes the three-dimensionality that MacLeish desires: like a globe, the poem should have more extension in time and space than a map or a picture. Not just a depiction of a fruit, it should *be* a *globed* fruit. Likewise, “old medallions to the thumb” and “the sleeve-worn stone / Of casement ledges where the moss has grown” are both not only “silent” or “dumb,” but they also have an enduring solidity, a tangible reality. These images of fruit, old medallions, and worn ledges may also seem a bit mysterious, like “the flight of birds” (line 8), which in some “wordless,” seemingly magical way is organized and orchestrated—as anyone knows who’s ever seen a flock of birds rise together and move as one, silently.

From lines 1–8, then, we draw our first principle of New Criticism:

- ☞ 1. A poem should be seen as an object—an object of an extraordinary and somewhat mysterious kind, a silent object that is not equal to the words printed on a page.

Lines 9–16 articulate another idea: “A poem should be motionless in time.” This idea seems easy enough to understand: MacLeish

believes that poems shouldn't change. Aren't Shakespeare's sonnets the same today as they were when he wrote them? ("So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee," as Sonnet 18 says.) But MacLeish's comparison, "As the moon climbs," is not so easy to grasp: how can the moon be "climbing" through the sky, yet "motionless in time"? Perhaps the answer lies in the repeated idea that the moon, like the poem, should be "Leaving, as the moon releases / Twig by twig the night-entangled trees" (11–12); it should be "Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves / Memory by memory the mind" (13–14). Something that is "leaving" is neither fully here nor fully gone; it is caught in time and space, in an in-between contradictory timespace. We do not notice a memory deteriorating: it is there, unchanging; then it is only partly there; then it may be gone. The moon climbing in the sky does seem like this: it appears to sit there, motionless in time, yet it is leaving and will "release" the trees. MacLeish repeats lines 9–10 in lines 15–16, as if his own poem is motionless, continuing on but remaining in the same place it was.

This paradox adds to the mystery of the earlier lines and also suggests a second principle:

- ☞ 2. The poem as silent object is unchanging, existing somehow both within and outside of time, "leaving" yet "motionless."

Lines 17–18 offer a third surprising idea: "A poem should be equal to: / not true." It's difficult to believe that MacLeish is saying that poems should lie. But what is he saying? Lines 19–22 appear to explain his point, but these lines seem particularly difficult. What can these lines possibly mean—ignoring for the moment the concluding assertion of lines 23–24, which seems to be that poems ought not have meanings? The lines are obscure basically because the verbs are missing, so our task of making sense must include imagining what has been left out.

First MacLeish says, "For all the history of grief / An empty doorway and a maple leaf" (19–20). If we look closely at this statement, its form is familiar and clear enough: "For X, Y." Or, adding a verb, "For X, substitute Y." Thus, I take these lines to mean simply that instead of recounting "all the history of grief," the poet should present instead "An empty doorway and a maple leaf." An empty doorway can speak to us of someone departed, conveying an emptiness and an absence that may be more compressed and intense than an entire history of grief. A maple leaf, perhaps lying on the ground, bursting with fall colors inevitably turning to brown and crumbling, may tell us something about loss more directly and powerfully and concisely than any history book.

The next two lines are similarly structured: “For love / The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea.” That is, “For love,” an abstraction, impossible to grasp, the poet should present something concrete: “The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea.” Although I can’t say precisely how the grasses and lights here stand for love, somehow as images they do seem romantic, mysterious, moving. This principle of selecting something concrete to stand for an abstraction had already been advocated by T. S. Eliot in 1919 in what turned out to be an extremely influential opinion for the formation of New Criticism: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art,” Eliot said, “is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion” (124–125). Not surprisingly, throughout its history New Criticism has been especially concerned with analyzing the imagery of particular works, noticing how a poem’s “objective correlatives” structure its ideas.

It is not then that the poem should lie, but rather that it does not strive to tell the truth in any literal or historical or prosaic way. Poetry, MacLeish is saying, should speak metaphorically, substituting evocative images for the description of emotions, or historical details, or vague ideas. Instead of telling us about an idea or emotion, literature confronts us with *something* that may spark emotions or ideas. A poem is an experience, not a discussion of an experience.

The final two lines summarize this point in a startling way: “A poem should not mean / But be.” Ordinarily we assume that words are supposed to convey a meaning, transferring ideas from an author to a reader. But the images that MacLeish’s poem has given us—the globed fruit, the old medallions, the casement ledges, the flight of birds, the moon climbing, the empty doorway and the maple leaf, the leaning grasses and the two lights—these do not “mean” anything in a literal, historical, scientific way. What is the meaning, for example, of a flight of birds? Of a casement ledge where some moss has grown? These things just *are*. They are suggestive and even moving, but their meaning is something we impose on them; they simply exist, and we experience their being more powerfully than any abstract idea. It would be a mistake to think an empty doorway is somehow a *translation* of all the history of grief.

In much the same way, poems (MacLeish is asserting) do not mean, but rather have an existence—which takes us to the third principle:

- ☞ 3. Poems as unchanging objects represent an organized entity, not a meaning. In this way, poems are therefore fundamentally different from prose: prose strives to convey meaning; but poems

cannot be perfectly translated or summarized, for they offer a being, an existence, an experience perhaps—not a meaning.

Radicals in Tweed Jackets

What was the appeal of these principles? Why did New Criticism, a drastically new way of reading, become so popular on college campuses?

In the landmark study that did much to solidify the academic prestige of the New Criticism, Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949), René Wellek declares, "The work of art is an object of knowledge" (156). Because the literary work has an "objective" status, Wellek says, critical statements about a work are not merely opinions of taste. "It will always be possible," he maintains, "to determine which point of view grasps the subject most thoroughly and deeply." Thus, "all relativism is ultimately defeated" (156).

Although this assumption that the poem exists like an object, like fruit, like medallions, allows New Critics to think of literary criticism as a discipline just as rigorous and prestigious as a science, it is clear that for New Critics poems are in an important way also not like the objects studied by science. Poems, as MacLeish puts it, are "motionless in time"; they embody, as Marianne Moore says, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Thus, a poem is an entity somehow transcending time, existing in a realm different from that of science, the realm of the literary, of the imagination.

The implications of this second crucial assumption, that poems exist outside of time, can already be seen in the criticism of T. S. Eliot, whose ideas (as we just noted) influenced the New Critics. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot's famous essay of 1919, poetry is said to be "not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (10). The New Critics are aware of course that poems have authors, and they will sometimes refer to biographical information, but it is not the focus of their attention. Close reading of the work itself should reveal what the reader needs to know. Historical and biographical information, to be sure, may sometimes be helpful, but it should not be essential.

This exclusion of authors and their contexts is taken to what might appear to be its logical extreme in Wimsatt and Beardsley's influential essay on "The Intentional Fallacy." Even when biographical and historical information is meticulously and voluminously gathered, as in the case of Lowe's work on Coleridge and *Kubla Khan*, Wimsatt and Beardsley question its value for reading the work. Even Coleridge's own account of how the poem came to him (in a dream, supposedly), Wimsatt and Beardsley say, does not tell us anything

about how to read the poem itself—even if we could be sure Coleridge is telling the truth. Only the poem can tell us how to read the poem.

By the same token, Wimsatt and Beardsley question the importance of the individual reader's response in "The Affective Fallacy." The groundwork for their position had already been worked out in the 1920s by I. A. Richards. Richards conducted a series of close-reading experiments with his students at Cambridge. He began with the assumption that students should be able to read poems richly by applying careful scrutiny to the works themselves. To focus students' attention on the work itself, Richards would often remove the distraction of authors' names, dates, even titles. In 1929, when he reported his results in *Practical Criticism*, two things appeared to be clear.

First, his students seemed not to be very good at reading texts carefully. Richards thought, and many people agreed, that students obviously needed much more training in "close reading." They needed to learn how to look carefully at a text, suppressing their own variable and subjective responses, as Wimsatt and Beardsley would later persuasively argue. How a work affects a particular reader, Wimsatt and Beardsley assert, is not critically significant. Whereas "the Intentional Fallacy," they say, "is a confusion between the poem and its origins," the "Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results*" (21). Biographers may want to speculate on the poet's intention, and psychologists may want to theorize about a poem's effects, but literary critics should study the poem itself.

The second thing made evident by Richards' "experiments" was that such close reading was not only possible but very rewarding, as Richards himself was able to read these isolated works in revealing and stimulating ways, exposing unsuspected complexities and subtleties in the works he examined. Even in the following description of the creative process of poets, taken from Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's New Critical textbook, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), the author's intention is of little enduring interest:

At the same time that he [the poet] is trying to envisage the poem as a whole, he is trying to relate the individual items to that whole. He cannot assemble them in a merely arbitrary fashion; they must bear some relation to each other. So he develops his sense of the whole, the anticipation of the finished poem, as he works with the parts, and moves from one part to another. Then as the sense of the whole develops, it modifies the process by which the poet selects and relates

the parts, the words, images, rhythms, local ideas, events, etc. . . . It is an infinitely complicated process of establishing interrelations. (527)

Implicit in this description of how a poet works are the directions for what a critic should do: most obviously, the critic will want to recover the idea, or principle, or theme, that holds the poem's parts together and thereby reveal how the parts relate to each other and to the whole. (Such a careful unfolding of the poem's parts and their relationships is often called an "explication.") Although speculation about the poet's actual process of creating the poem may be entertaining, it is finally irrelevant, for the critic's real interest is in the finished poem, not how it was finished. We can tell what the poet was working toward, the poem as a whole, the "interrelations" of its parts, simply by looking carefully at the shape and structure of the poem—at its form, in other words.

This emphasis on a work's form has led some thinkers to link New Criticism to another movement, Russian formalism, which originated with the work of Viktor Shklovsky in 1917—about the same time that New Criticism's ideas first began to emerge in Western Europe and North America. The Russian formalists do seem to prefigure the New Criticism when they assume that a writer should be evaluated as a craftsman who fashions an artistic object. The writer should *not* be evaluated, New Critics and Russian formalists would agree, on the basis of the work's message. *Paradise Lost* is a great poem (or it isn't) because of Milton's artistic performance, not because of the validity of its theological or political message. Russian formalism (not too surprisingly) was rather short-lived, fading away by the late 1920s, discouraged by the Russian authorities, who no doubt noted that focusing on style and technique would tend to let all sorts of ideas float around.

Although New Criticism has been criticized at times for its lack of political commitment, one could argue (especially in light of Russian formalism's fate) that an attention to form (not message) is in fact a subtly powerful commitment to openness and freedom: you can say whatever you like, New Criticism implicitly suggests, as long as you say it well. Admittedly, in celebrating a certain kind of form (unified complexity), New Criticism has perhaps not been so entirely open in its actual practice, as feminist critics have persuasively argued, noticing the predominance of white males in the canon of works valued by New Critics. Is the relative absence of women in the traditional canon of New Criticism really a consequence of its principles? One could argue that women have tended to write in genres that may resist New Criticism's particular kind of close reading (in journals and letters,

for instance), but certainly some women (Jane Austen, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf) have produced works celebrated by New Critical readings.

It is clear enough that New Criticism's kind of formalism, which turns away from politics, must take place within some (unacknowledged, invisible) political context, but at the same time it does not seem clear to me that any particular political stance is inherently more or less suited to New Critical strategies. New Criticism discriminates against works that are "poorly made" by its definition—works that are simplistic, single-sided, shallow, inarticulate, lacking in irony and self-consciousness. New Criticism champions works that repay our careful and imaginative attention, works that seem to challenge us to look again, to look more deeply, to find a more complex unity. It might even be said that New Criticism makes it both possible and necessary for other kinds of approaches to arise. At the least, many critics would agree that New Criticism remains a kind of "norm" against which other approaches can be delineated. At its best, it remains an exciting and revealing strategy for unfolding literary works.

HOW TO DO NEW CRITICISM

To make sure the process is clear in your mind, let's think of it in three steps:

1. What complexities (or tensions, ironies, paradoxes, oppositions, ambiguities) can you find in the work?
2. What idea unifies the work, resolving these ambiguities?
3. What details or images support this resolution (that is, connect the parts to the whole)?

1. The first step assumes that great works are complex, even when they appear to be simple. Literature does not imitate life in any literal way, according to the New Critics; instead, poems (and other works) create realities of their own, transforming and ordering our experience. A poem, as Coleridge says, in a quotation often cited by New Critics, is an act of the imagination, "that synthetic and magical power"—an act that "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposites or discordant qualities" (11). Poems have the power, Coleridge says, "of reducing multitude into unity of effect." And, for the New Critics, the richer and more compelling the "multitude" of ideas or "discordant qualities," the greater the

poem's power. The sort of complexity that New Critics particularly value is captured in Keats's concept of "negative capability," which is also often cited by New Critics: it is the capability "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1:193).

When New Critics identify a poem's complexities (the first step here), they use a number of closely related terms, especially "irony," "ambiguity," "paradox," and "tension." Although these terms mean slightly different things, they all point to the idea of complexity—that the poem says one thing and means another, or says two things at once, or seems to say opposing things, or strains against its apparent meaning. For instance, in "The Language of Paradox," a celebrated essay from *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), Cleanth Brooks shows how Donne's famous poem "The Canonization" (included here in an Appendix) sets up a dilemma:

Either: Donne does not take love seriously; here he is merely sharpening his wit as a sort of mechanical exercise. Or: Donne does not take sainthood seriously; here he is merely indulging in a cynical and bawdy parody. (11)

2. The second step assumes that great works do have a unifying idea, a theme. It's much more useful to think of this theme in terms of a complete thought or a sentence rather than a phrase. For instance, to say that the theme of Donne's "Canonization" is "love and religion" really doesn't tell us much about how Donne solves the dilemma of sainthood versus love. Here's what Brooks tells his readers:

Neither account [that Donne doesn't take love seriously, or that he doesn't take religion seriously] is true; a reading of the poem will show that Donne takes both love and religion seriously; it will show, further, that the paradox is here his inevitable instrument. (11)

A cynical reader might observe (with some justification) that paradox is Donne's "inevitable" instrument because the New Critics inevitably find something like paradox in every great poem. But Brooks' point, of course, is that paradox is inevitable because Donne, with the imagination of a great poet, sets up the problem in such a way that only paradox will resolve it.

3. The third step unfolds or explicates the poem, indicating how the parts work together. This description of the poem is no substitute for the poem itself, but it should enrich our experience of it.

Oftentimes, as in the case of Brooks' essay on "The Canonization," the critic will move through the work carefully from beginning to end, dividing the work into parts, and then suggesting how every aspect of the parts relates to our sense of the whole. Following Aristotle's ancient ideas, New Critics have talked about the "organic unity" of works, as if the poem were a creature, a living being, with every part playing an essential role.

Here is a sample of Brooks' explication:

In this last stanza, the theme receives a final complication. The lovers in rejecting life actually win the most intense life. This paradox has been hinted at earlier in the phoenix metaphor. Here it receives a powerful dramatization. (15)

In this passage, notice how Brooks identifies a paradox related to the theme and then connects that paradox to an earlier image. These are both characteristic moves for New Critics.

Film and Other Genres

These steps won't read a poem for you; they won't supply the sort of imagination, creativity, and attention you'll need to read literature closely. But they will help to structure your process of reading and writing, and they can in fact be used to help you analyze any kind of literary work or artistic object, or perhaps anything. Consider for example this concluding paragraph from Michael Atkinson's review of *Napoleon Dynamite*, a bizarre, award-winning film released in 2004 (to understand the paragraph, you should know that Jared Hess is the film's director, and Jon Heder plays Napoleon; also, Atkinson refers in this passage to a Todd Solondz film, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, that offers a darker view of teen-age angst):

But the center of Hess's cyclone is Heder and his tetherball-playing monster teen, who is both the film's forbidding hero and its great object of derision. Unlike the Solondz film, *Napoleon Dynamite* exudes little sense of social horror; it struggles to maintain a sunny disposition despite the traumatic social meltdown we witness and the apparent fact that Napoleon is headed not for a tech college but for a long, dire career in food service. He's all too emblematic of too many Americans, and if Hess's movie weren't so funny, it'd be a tragedy.

Even without seeing this movie, or reading the rest of the review, you can see the assumptions that are driving Atkinson's analysis. In the

first sentence, Napoleon, played by Heder, is paradoxically both “hero” and “object of derision.” The adjective that modifies “hero” is “forbidding,” while the adjective that modifies “object of derision” is “great,” and this pulling in opposite directions also occurs in the description of Napoleon as a “tetherball-playing monster teen”: tetherball is an elementary school game, played by children during recess—not at all what one associates with a “monster teen.” The second sentence also celebrates the film’s balancing of oppositions, maintaining “a sunny disposition despite the traumatic social meltdown we witness” and Napoleon’s apparently dim future. The third and final sentence continues to see the film in paradoxical terms, as Napoleon’s weirdness is somehow also “all too emblematic of too many Americans.” As an earlier sentence puts it, Napoleon “is such a fantastic creation you can’t help seeing him as both a catastrophically extreme case and the common flailing nerd we all still shelter in our deepest memory banks.” This kind of both/and vision, unifying oppositions, extends even to the genre of the film, as Atkinson’s conclusion asserts that the film is a comedy that would have been a tragedy, if it “weren’t so funny.”



Clearly Atkinson, like a New Critic, is noticing and valuing paradoxes, ironies, and tensions. Moreover, Atkinson sees how these oppositions are held together: The movie is dismal yet ultimately “sunny,” a tragedy that is really a comedy; Napoleon is both heroic and ridiculous, “catastrophically extreme” and everyman. This idea, in fact, is arguably what unifies the film for Atkinson—that at some deeper level, we are like Napoleon. His absurdity is what sets him apart, and at the same what makes him part of us. We laugh at Napoleon, but he is constructed in such a way that we are also laughing at some core aspect of ourselves. Although Atkinson is obviously interested in how audiences respond to the film, he tends to view the movie as an artistic object, rather than an experience. He sees the character of Napoleon, for instance, as a coherent thing, “a perfectly conceived and executed battery of melodramatic harrumphs, bruised exhalations, defensive squints, clueless pronouncements, and explosively irate retorts.” And the movie as a whole succeeds because its complex ironies and paradoxes are held together in a satisfying unity. Although I seriously doubt that Atkinson considers himself to be a card-carrying New Critic, his assumptions and values are in line with New Criticism—which isn’t surprising, when we consider its pervasive popularity over the past century.

This brief look at a movie review suggests how we might reason backward from a finished essay to the strategies employed. To give you a better idea of how to use these principles, let’s now work through the process of writing a sample New Critical essay in the next section.

THE WRITING PROCESS: A SAMPLE ESSAY

Literary works are often charming, uplifting, amusing; but they are also often troubling and challenging, confronting difficult and disturbing issues, stimulating our thought. The following poem will probably haunt you. It is a powerful and moving engagement with one of the most controversial and emotional topics of our day. Read it carefully, writing down any questions or comments that occur, looking particularly for tensions or oppositions or ambiguities.

The Mother *Gwendolyn Brooks*

Abortions will not let you forget.
You remember the children you got that you did not get,
The damp small pulps with a little or no hair,

The singers and workers that never handled the air.
 You will never neglect or beat 5
 Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
 You will never wind up the sucking-thumb
 Or scuttle off ghosts that come.
 You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,
 Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother eye. 10

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim
 killed children.
 I have contracted. I have eased
 My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.
 I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized
 Your luck 15
 And your lives from your unfinished reach,
 If I stole your births and your names,
 Your straight baby tears and your games,
 Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages,
 aches and your deaths,
 If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths, 20
 Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.
 Though why should I whine,
 Whine that the crime was other than mine?—
 Since anyhow you are dead.
 Or rather, or instead, 25
 You were never made.
 But that too, I am afraid,
 Is faulty: of, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?
 You were born, you had body, you died.
 It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried. 30

Believe me, I loved you all.
 Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I
 loved you
 All.

(1945)

Preparing to Write

Compare what you've written in your brainstorming to the following list of observations:

(a) The speaker says "Abortions will not let you forget," as if abortions could actively do something. But an abortion is a medical procedure; it can't make "you" remember or keep "you" from forgetting. Why doesn't the speaker just say "You can't forget about your abortion"? And

why does the speaker say “you” rather than “me,” especially since the second section reveals that she has had abortions?

(b) The second line is contradictory, referring to children “you got that you did not get”? Either you got them or you didn’t, it would seem.

(c) Why is the poem called “The Mother” if she has had abortions? Does this refer to her other children or to the abortions? This is probably an important tension: it is, after all, the title.

(d) Lines 3 and 4 offer conflicting views. In line 3, “the children” are simply “damp small pulps with a little or with no hair.” A “pulp” isn’t alive, isn’t a person, so removing a hairless (or nearly hairless) pulp isn’t a big deal. But line 4 refers to the abortions in a strikingly different way, as “singers and workers that never handled the air.” As singers and workers, the children are real, and their loss is tragic: They did not even get a chance to handle the air—which is a wonderful and surprising description of living. We are all, as singers and workers, handling the air.

(e) Another opposition shapes the next few lines. Lines 5–6 suggest that the abortions were in some respects a good thing: “You will never neglect or beat / Them.” The next image, never “silence or buy with a sweet,” is perhaps faintly negative or even neutral: it doesn’t sound good to think of silencing or buying children, and giving them “a sweet” probably isn’t the greatest thing to do, but every parent resorts to such strategies. And the next image moves into the realm of tenderness: to “wind up the sucking-thumb” or “scuttle off ghosts that come”—these are acts of kindness. So the lines move from abuse, which places the abortions in a more positive light, to parental care, which makes the abortions seem more tragic.

(f) I notice that the speaker seems to be talking about more than one abortion. But the pain revealed in the poem won’t let us easily conclude that the speaker is callous, readily aborting babies without a thought.

(g) The idea of eating up the children in line 10 is strange (“a snack of them, with gobbling mother eye”).

It’s fine if your ideas aren’t similar to those above. In fact, it’s great because we’d certainly be bored if everyone thought the same things. But you may find it useful to notice the level of detail involved above and the kind of attention being paid. This kind of preparation will make writing about the poem much easier.

You might reasonably wonder how much you need to know about 1945, when the poem was published; about the history of the debate over abortion; about Gwendolyn Brooks’s life; about her career as a poet and about her other poems; and on and on. All these things would be good to know, but in adopting a New Critical stance, you will assume that the poem itself will reveal whatever it is essential for you to know. So, remind yourself specifically what a New Critical reading attempts to expose: unity and complexity. Great works confront us with a unified ambiguity; second-rate works see things simply or fragmentarily.

Shaping

What would you say is the unifying idea of “The Mother”? What holds it together? Those questions are crucial to a New Critical reading because they lead to your thesis, which will shape and control the development of your essay. Even in the few notes I’ve reproduced above here, it seems clear that the title points us toward the poem’s complexity: the speaker, as the title identifies her, is “The Mother,” and yet she speaks only of the children she does not have, the children who have been aborted. So how can she be a mother without any children? How can she love her children, or have destroyed them, if they don’t exist? That, it seems to me, is one way of saying what the poem struggles through. The theme or unifying idea, holding together the ambiguous status of the speaker, can be stated in any number of ways, and you might try out your own way of expressing it. Here’s one way to put it:

Although her children do not exist, and may have never existed, the speaker is a mother because she loves her “children.”

In articulating this theme, I’ve given emphasis to the way the poem ends. Generally that’s where the oppositions are resolved. In this case, I would argue, the ambiguity between the speaker as mother and non-mother is resolved at the end of the poem with her declaration of love. She could not love the children if they did not have some kind of existence, and if they exist in some way, then she is some kind of “mother.” But her status is by no means simple. Likewise, she “knew” them, she says, even if it was “faintly”; and, again, it would seem she could not know them if they did not exist, if they were not her children.

The strategy of a New Critical reading, then, would involve showing how the details of the poem support and elaborate this complex or ironic unity. Your structure involves arranging this evidence in a coherent way, grouping kinds of details perhaps or moving logically through the poem. That is, throughout the poem, a New Critical reading would find oppositions reinforcing and supporting in some way the poem’s central ambiguity. For instance, line 21 would be seen as a reflection of the central opposition. The speaker says, “even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.” Just as the children who are aborted are not children; just as the woman who gives up her motherhood by having an abortion nonetheless retains her claim to the name of “mother”; by the same token, the speaker’s “deliberateness is not deliberate.”

In other words, her decision to have the abortion was made with “deliberateness,” and for such decisions we are more accountable, by some measures anyway, than for impulsive decisions. Premeditated murder, for instance, is in theory a more serious crime than a spontaneous crime of passion. But the mother’s culpability is qualified by the rest of the sentence, which says that the deliberateness was not “deliberate.” She carefully decided something she did not carefully decide, so it seems.

Drafting

After you’ve worked your way through the poem, noting oppositions, tensions, ambiguities, paradoxes, and considering how these relate to the poem’s unity, then it’s time for a draft. Here is a draft developed out of the annotations above; it’s been polished up a bit, and there are annotations in the margin to help you see what is going on.

The Mother Without Children: A Reading of Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Mother”

From (c) in the notes: this tension seemed to unify the poem.

The intro has set up the essay’s form: mother vs. not-mother.

This paragraph elaborates on the two possibilities: children or not.

The two possibilities come together in the uncertainty.

Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Mother” points to a paradox with its first word, “Abortions.” Although the speaker is called “the mother” in the title, she quickly reveals that “the children” have actually been aborted. How can she be a mother if her children never existed? Her opening line asserts that “Abortions will not let you forget,” but what is there for her to remember? The rest of the poem shows the “mother’s” struggle with this problem: how to remember “the children that you did not get” (2).

On the one hand, the speaker realizes the children are nothing more than “damp small pulps with a little or with no hair” (3), but the rest of this sentence sees them as “singers and workers that never handled the air” (4). If they can be called “singers and workers,” then they must have some existence. But if they never “handled the air,” they did not work and sing, and so their status as workers and singers is problematic, to say the least. This question is what is distressing the “mother,” because if these fetuses were children, then her statement in line 17 is accurate: “I stole your births and your names.” But the line begins with an “If,” and it is this uncertainty that provides the speaker with some comfort.

This explains how the uncertainty comforts the mother.

This point began to emerge in (f): the mother's pain suggests her love, which is explicitly declared later on.

Still relying on the opposition: mother/not; children/not.

From (a) above.

Resolving the problem set up in the intro.

The comfort takes two forms. The mother first eases her pain by pointing to the uncertainty of her decision to have the abortions: "even in my deliberations I was not deliberate" (21). Since she is uncertain about the status of what is being aborted, she decided without knowing what she was deciding. In truth, she still does not know what her decision means: no one can say with authority when life begins, or when fetuses become persons and when they are still unviable tissue masses, or "pulps" (3).

More importantly, the speaker is also comforted in the end by declaring her love, even though this expression paradoxically sustains her pain and mourning. She clings to the idea of her "dim killed children" (11), refusing to let them become "pulps," because she can love them only if they actually existed. So she must say that she "knew" them, even while admitting it was only "faintly" (32). She does claim her status as "the mother," as the title says, even though it causes her pain. As she says in the opening line, "Abortions will not let you forget," but perhaps only if you continue to see yourself as a mother, even though you have no children. Thus, the poem balances the speaker's two visions of herself, as murderer and as mother; and it resolves this conflict in the final lines, as the mother is able to atone for her decision, in some measure, by suffering with her memory always, saying "I loved you, I loved you / All" (32-33).

In this essay I obviously didn't explicate every detail that supports my thesis. Rather, I tried to bring forth enough evidence to be persuasive. How much evidence you need to present to make a close reading convincing will vary depending on the work and your thesis. Follow your common sense and the guidance of your teacher.

Finally, as you apply New Criticism on your own, notice how two factors helped the sample essay develop smoothly.

1. Thorough preparation. The essay, for the most part, arranges and connects the extensive notes on the poem. When I came to write my essay, I had already written a great deal. I had much more material than I could use in my essay, and so I was able to pick and choose which ideas to use. This process, of selecting from an abundance of ideas, is a whole lot more pleasant than struggling for something to say.

2. Theoretical awareness. Since I knew what kind of approach I wanted to take, I knew to look for certain things in the poem: ideas or images in opposition; complexity or ambiguity; the unifying idea or

theme. Likewise, I knew what my essay was going to set out to do. I didn't have to worry about whether Brooks might have intended to say this or that, nor did I have to worry about my own attitude toward abortion or even my own reaction to the poem. My job was to focus on the text itself, exposing its complexity and unity. By being aware of the theoretical stance you are evolving or adopting, you clarify for yourself what you're doing and how to do it.

PRACTICING NEW CRITICISM

It's highly unlikely that one example will make New Criticism crystal clear for you. You'll need to practice it for yourself, see other examples, and (ideally) discuss its workings with your teacher and classmates.

To get you started, I offer here three poems and a parable, along with guiding questions for each.

forgiving my father

Lucille Clifton

it is friday. we have come
to the paying of the bills.
all week you have stood in my dreams
like a ghost, asking for more time
but today is payday, payday old man, 5
my mother's hand opens in her early grave
and i hold it out like a good daughter.

there is no more time for you. there will
never be time enough daddy daddy old lecher
old liar. i wish you were rich so i could take it all 10
and give the lady what she was due
but you were the son of a needy father,
the father of a needy son,
you gave her all you had
which was nothing. you have already given her 15
all you had.

you are the pocket that was going to open
and come up empty any friday.
you were each other's bad bargain, not mine.
daddy old pauper old prisoner, old dead man 20
what am i doing here collecting?
you lie side by side in debtor's boxes
and no accounting will open them up.

(1969)

QUESTIONS

1. How does the title relate to the poem? (That is, how is the title at odds with what the poem says?) List the statements in the poem that do not sound “forgiving.”
2. What is the significance of “collecting” in line 21? How is this word like “accounting” and “open” in line 23? In what sense is the speaker “collecting”?
3. What reasons does the poem offer for forgiving the father?
4. How is the poem’s conflict resolved? Is the phrase “forgiving a debt” relevant to this poem?
5. How would you state the theme of this poem in one sentence? (Try a two-part sentence: “Although x, y.”)

My Father’s Martial Art*Stephen Shu-ning Liu*

When he came home Mother said he looked
like a monk and stank of green fungus.

At the fireside he told us about life
at the monastery: his rock pillow,
his cold bath, his steel-bar lifting 5
and his wood-chopping. He didn’t see
a woman for three winters, on Mountain O Mei.

“My Master was both light and heavy.
He skipped over treetops like a squirrel.
Once he stood on a chair, one foot tied 10
to a rope. We four pulled; we couldn’t
move him a bit. His kicks could split
a cedar’s trunk.”

I saw Father break into a pumpkin
with his fingers. I saw him drop a hawk 15
with bamboo arrows. He rose before dawn, filled
our backyard with a harsh sound *hah, hah, hah*:
there was his Black Dragon Sweep, his Crane Stand,
his Mantis Walk, his Tiger Leap, his Cobra Coil. . .
Infrequently he taught me tricks and made me 20
fight the best of all the village boys.

From a busy street I brood over high cliffs
on O Mei, where my father and his Master sit:
shadows spread across their faces as the smog
between us deepens into a funeral pyre. 25

But don't retreat into night, my father.
Come down from the cliffs. Come

with a single Black Dragon Sweep and hush
this oncoming traffic with your *hah, hah, hah*.

(1982)

QUESTIONS

1. Where is the poem's speaker located? How does this location relate to what he remembers?
2. What has happened to his father? What does line 25 suggest? Why does it seem especially appropriate that the "smog" comes between them?
3. What do you make of the name of the mountain? What might the oncoming traffic symbolize?
4. In each of the following pairs, which quality is embodied in the poem?
 - Closeness, distance
 - Presence, absence
 - Power, impotence
 - Light, heavy
 - Spiritual, mundane
5. Do you think the word "Infrequently" in line 20 is significant? How does it contribute to the poem? (Does it simplify things? Make them more complex?)
6. What is the speaker struggling against in the poem? How is the struggle resolved? How is the resolution ambiguous and complex?

On My First Son

Ben Jonson

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.

Oh, could I lose all father now! For why
Will man lament the state he should envy?
To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage,
And if no other misery, yet age!

5

escaped

Rest in soft peace, and, asked, say, Here doth lie
 Ben. Jonson his best piece of poetry. 10
 For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such
 As what he loves may never like too much.

(1616)

QUESTIONS

1. Ben Jonson's son was named "Benjamin," a Hebrew name that translates into English as the "child of the right hand." How does this fact help you to make sense of the poem? What does the first line tell us about the person who is being addressed in the poem? And what do you think New Critics mean when they say that we should focus upon the poem itself? (Is the significance of the child's name "in" this poem?)
2. What is the role of Jonson's religious faith in this poem? How is it a source of both comfort and tension?
3. In two places in the poem, Jonson points to "too much" of an emotion, creating an opposition between hope and love in the second line, and between loving and liking in the final line. How does this opposition contribute to the poem's unifying idea? (What, in other words, is the poem's unifying idea? Hint: What is the problem that Jonson is trying to solve in this poem? See lines 5 and 6.)
4. Explain how our understanding of lines 9 and 10 changes as we continue to read. That is, what do readers think when we read "Here doth lie/ Ben. Johnson"? And what do we think as we finish this sentence? What does this shift in reference contribute to the poem? Does New Criticism value this kind of complexity?
5. In the sciences, ambiguity is usually considered undesirable. New Criticism, emerging as part of an alternate culture to the sciences, generally celebrates ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning. In line 11, "For whose sake" seems to have at least three possible references: Benjamin Jonson (the son), Ben Jonson, Jonson's poetry. Is this ambiguity fruitful? Can it be convincingly resolved?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son¹ (c. 90 CE)

And he [Jesus] said, A certain man had two sons:
 And the younger of them said to *his* father, Father, give me the portion of
 goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them *his* living.²

¹Luke 15:11–32

²*divided ... his living*: one-third of the father's estate; the son had to renounce all further claim.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country,³ and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.⁴

And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks⁵ that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

And bring hither the fatted calf,⁶ and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing.

And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

³*far country*: countries of the Jewish dispersal, or diaspora, in the areas bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

⁴*feed swine*: in Jewish custom, pigs were unclean.

⁵*husks*: pods of the carob tree, the eating of which was thought to be penitential.

⁶*fatted calf*: grain-fed calf.

It was meet⁷ that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

QUESTIONS

1. The speaker of this story (or parable) is of course Jesus, as reported in *The Gospel of Luke*, and the context is that Jesus has been accused by “the Pharisees and scribes” of “welcoming sinners” and even eating with them. The parable apparently answers this charge—that Jesus spends time in the company of sinners. Does an awareness of that context affect your reading of the parable? How?
2. What irony do you find in the story?
3. How does a phrase like “the fatted calf” (in this translation) affect the tone of this parable? What other words and phrases do you find that contribute to the voice here?
4. What is the unifying idea of this parable?

Useful Terms for New Criticism

Here are some essential terms that are useful in literary analysis, including New Criticism:

Voice: The voice is what we don’t actually hear, but must imagine that we hear in order to read the work itself effectively. In fiction, we are usually given information about who is speaking. In drama, when it is performed anyway, we can actually see and hear the characters speaking. But in poetry, the reader often has to invent the voice out of clues in the work. Oftentimes, readers of poetry are not told directly who is speaking, to whom, from where, on what occasion. We have to figure that out, and that effort helps us to imagine the voices we should hear in the poem.

Speaker: The person speaking in the poem is not equivalent to the author. Even if the poem’s speaker has the same name as the author, we should not assume that this speaker is the author. The speaker within the poem is a presentation, a kind of character.

Tone: Tone means pretty much the same thing in critical circles that it means in everyday life. It’s the way something is said. What is interesting about texts, again, is that they have no tone until we supply it, and we do so based upon the clues of the text, as we read them. This invention is often not easy, necessitating careful attention. Many readers find it helpful to read a poem aloud, to

⁷*meet*: appropriate.

hear the tone of the work. But note that you cannot simply read the poem aloud in order to create an interpretation of it; you really need an interpretation in order to read it aloud appropriately. Finding the right tone for a speaker in a poem is a process of trial and error. As you read the work, evolve your understanding of the way something is being said. Tone is sometimes part of the work's complexity—since the literal meaning may be altered by the tone.

Point of View: Everyone has to be somewhere, and point of view is simply that place from which a voice is speaking. Stories may be told by a *first-person narrator*, an “I” who tells us what happened. This “I” may be a participant in what happened, or not. The **narrator** (or speaker, if there doesn't seem to be a story to narrate) can also be a voice standing outside the story. Instead of saying “I thought John was going” (first person), the narrator could say “Sam thought John was going” (*third-person narrator*). If the third-person narrator seems to know everything, then we say the narrator is *omniscient*; if the third-person narrator knows more than any person or other entity could (for instance, what other characters are thinking), but not everything, then we have a “*limited omniscient narrator*.”

Irony: Irony calls for the reader to create, in a sense, a certain kind of mask for the speaker. When the reader identifies irony, the reader says, in effect, “I see two of you: a false you who's saying something that I'm supposed to see through; and another more true you who is really saying something different from what you appear on the surface to be saying.” The mask may be serious; the face underneath may be kidding. For New Critics, irony is a key term, pointing to the multiple meanings of a single assertion. A text with irony is complex, meaning potentially more than one thing. Paradox, oxymoron, tension, and other terms are also used by New Critics to point to unified complexity.



Checklist for New Criticism

1. Read closely, identifying the work's oppositions, tensions, paradoxes, ironies.
2. Read closely, assuming that everything in the work—figures of speech, point of view, diction, recurrent ideas or images, everything—is carefully calculated to contribute to the work's unity.
3. Read closely, determining how the poem's various elements create unity.

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Recommended Further Reading: New Criticism

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