



Tangled up in myths: Hemmingway with the Cuban leader in 1960

CHAPTER

1

An Introduction, Theoretically

*We should study literary criticism
and the theories of literature for
the same reasons we read
literature—to forever alter our
perspectives, to escape our own
vanities, and to extend the
horizons of our limitations.*

—Lynn Jordan Stidon

(from her Final Exam in
English 102)

TEXTUAL TOURS

Literary works are, in a way, like places we can visit. Some are foreign, mysterious, puzzling; others make us feel right at home. Some call us back again and again; others we feel obliged to experience, knowing they'll do us good even though we never quite enjoy them. Inhabiting a literary work, we can see how other people live; we can see, to a certain extent, through other people's eyes. We can momentarily transcend the boundaries of our lives.

Although wandering around is always an option, travelers who know what they're looking for and have a plan for getting there are more likely to have a satisfying, interesting visit. Literary criticism aims to bring such order and organization to our experience of literary works, focusing our attention on this, disregarding that,

putting various parts together, making sense of what we see. When you write about literature, you serve as a kind of tour guide, leading your reader (and yourself) through the work. Readers can see what's in front of them, but they don't necessarily know what to make of it without some persuasive commentary.

Critical theories are like the different travel agencies through which the various tour guides generally work. Different agencies feature different kinds of tours: one specializes in cultural immersion, another in artistic appreciation, another in historical recollection, another in personal indulgence. The agencies provide the frameworks, the general guidelines for your performance as a tour guide. To write most successfully about a literary work, then, you need not only to have spent some time with the work but also to have some clear idea of the kinds of tours available and how they might be combined or adapted. You need, in other words, some understanding of various critical theories and practices.

CHECKING SOME BAGGAGE

But before we begin our tours, we should consider some basic questions often asked by students embarking on such investigations, and then address a bit more directly the purpose and plan of this book.

“Is there one correct interpretation of a literary work?”

Perhaps there are English teachers somewhere like the one in John Cheever's “Expelled,” who tells students that her interpretation of *Hamlet* is the only one they need to know—it's “the one accepted on college-board papers,” she says. But most teachers (and certainly your own if this book has been assigned) cherish variety and difference in literary criticism, encouraging students to think for themselves when they write about literature. Just as there is no one best place to view the Blue Ridge Mountains, so there is no one best reading of *Hamlet* or any work. Shift your vantage point a little, change your interests, or just let some time pass, and you'll see something new.

“So are all opinions about literature equally valid?”

Surely some opinions seem more convincing or satisfying than others. Endorsing variety doesn't necessarily mean that all opinions are equal, that any piece of literary criticism is just as

good as any other. Just because we appreciate various views of the mountains, we need not also agree that all vantage points are equally satisfying to all people. If you construct a reading of *Hamlet* this week and a different interpretation next week, it's unlikely that you or your readers will value both of them equally, or even that everyone will agree on which one is superior. Some readings are arguably better than others, but to make such a determination, we need first to ask: Better for what? Better for whom? This book aims to address such questions, attempting not only to explain clearly and explicitly how to use various critical approaches but also to assess what purposes different approaches are likely to serve (better for what), as well as what sort of audience is likely to be influenced and even created by different critical strategies (better for whom).

Consider, for instance, the photograph at the beginning of this chapter:

What does it mean?

- Are these men standing so close together because they're close friends? Perhaps they're European?
- Are they father and son, perhaps—genetically disposed to superior beards? Is that the wife/mother in between them?
- Are they trying to kiss, and laughing because their caps are getting in the way? The younger man's attire does have sort of a Village People look. Is it possible these men are gay?
- Are they perhaps actors, or politicians? Don't they seem a little too jovial? Is this scene staged or real?
- Is it possible these men never actually met? Perhaps the picture has an air of unreality about it because it is a computer-generated fake? Perhaps these are wax models?

Some of these suggestions no doubt seem to you less plausible than others, but it would be very difficult to exclude totally even the wackiest of readings on the basis of the picture alone, wouldn't it?

If the meaning here is limited only by the creativity of the interpreter (and perhaps by the receptivity of anyone the interpreter wants to persuade), then what happens when we bring a context to the work—when we put the picture in a frame, in a sense? This famous photograph, taken in 1960, captures Ernest Hemingway, the legendary American writer (on the left), talking with Fidel Castro, Cuba's equally legendary dictator. Now that we have a historical context, do we know what the picture means? In

terms of Hemingway's life, the photo still might mean any number of things. Since Hemingway took his own life in 1961, reportedly in despair after extended illness, the "meaning" of the picture for some viewers might be what it suggests about Hemingway's health in 1960. Do we see hints that Hemingway is not well? (I don't; he appears virile and vigorous, although there is much other evidence that his physical and mental health was failing.) For *Castro's* biography, the photo would have quite different meanings. And in a history of Cuban-American relations, the photo would likely have other meanings.

In fact, although this picture has appeared in many contexts, one of the more interesting surely occurred in *Newsweek* in September 1994, illustrating an article on the Clinton Administration's Cuban policies. What, one might wonder, does the great American writer meeting with the notorious Cuban leader in 1960 have to do with foreign policy in the 1990s? The picture is captioned "TANGLED UP IN MYTHS: Hemingway with the Cuban leader in 1960" (26), and Michael Elliott's accompanying article argues that U.S. attitudes toward Cuba are clouded by fantasies and misperceptions. To understand the picture in the context of Elliott's essay, then, one must not only recognize Hemingway and Castro, but also realize that Hemingway lived in Cuba a substantial part of his life, fishing, drinking, entertaining buddies. When we think of Cuba, Elliott writes, we think of "romance, casinos, and marlin" (27). "From Teddy Roosevelt to Jimmy Buffett, with contributions from Ernest Hemingway . . . and the U.S. officers who first mixed rum and Coke® to form a *cuba libre*," Elliott says, Americans have formed an unrealistic vision of Cuba, thinking of it as a country that naturally ought to be an extension of the United States—a playground, a tropical resort.

Thus, the picture's meaning within the context of Elliott's essay would seem to be pretty clear: it's an allusion to "Hemingway's Cuba," as we have imagined it, versus the real Cuba, as Castro has controlled it. But there is always more that can be said, if we look again, more closely; if we reconsider the context, thinking from a different perspective. The picture might be seen in larger symbolic terms, for instance: why not think of Hemingway as standing, in a sense, for America; and Castro, in the same way, for Cuba. Thus Hemingway the brilliant writer, able to express his dreams and desires, embodies the openness, creativity, and accomplishment of the United States. His casual shirt and comfortable cap contrast

sharply with Castro's rigid hat and stiffly starched shirt—just as the freedom and comfort of America contrast sharply with the oppressive, impoverished regime of communist Cuba. Castro's military-style costume lacks decoration or insignia, as if he wants to promote the misleading notion that he is an ordinary man, one of the common people. The truly common people in Castro's Cuba are represented by the woman in the background, frowning as she is being squeezed out of the picture, ignored by her communist dictator. Even the background of the picture reinforces this reading, with lush vegetation and windows behind Hemingway, and a blankness behind Castro.

However "correct" (or "incorrect") this interpretation might seem, it does not exhaust the photograph's potential meaning. In fact, from the point of view of a Cuban revolutionary, loyal to Castro, it is possible to construct a contrasting reading. Employing that context, one might see Hemingway as a symbol of America's moral and social bankruptcy. Despite the appearance of health, America, like Hemingway, is headed toward its inevitable self-annihilation. Years of self-indulgence have taken a toll. Compare the vigor and strength of Castro. Rather than a rumpled shirt, not even entirely buttoned, Castro is wearing a crisp shirt, a smart hat, reflecting the discipline of his people. And our imaginary Castro communist might smugly look back and reflect that just as Castro has outlasted Hemingway by many years, so will Cuba be thriving long after the U.S. has destroyed itself. The point I'm emphasizing here is that our understanding of a text is shaped by the context in which we see it. If this insight isn't surprising to you, its implications are nonetheless profound—and often overlooked. Although a picture sometimes might, as we say, be worth a thousand words, even a picture can be read in many different ways, including opposing ways. When we think about how to take, or create, the meaning of anything—a poem, a story, a photograph, a life—we cannot avoid this interplay of texts and contexts. This territory, in which we think explicitly about how meaning is made, is called "critical theory".

The modifier "critical" in this context doesn't mean theory that is "inclined to find fault or judge severely"—just as "literary criticism" is not devoted to making harsh or negative judgments. "Critical" also means "involving skillful judgment" and "of essential importance" (Webster's definitions). Critical theory is thus concerned with those ideas that are essential to the process of making

skillful judgements about literature. Such skillful judgements are the business of literary criticism.

ANYTHING TO DECLARE?

“But don’t such theoretical issues distract from the study of literature itself?”

The focus in this text on the assumptions, strategies, and purposes shaping literary criticism—on critical theories in other words—is not a step away from literature or writing about literature; rather, such assumptions, strategies, and purposes make a deeply rewarding engagement with literature possible. Theory enables practice. Even the simplest acts of literary response, such as “This is boring,” depend on a certain theoretical stance: in this case, the stance includes the assumption that the purpose of literature includes entertaining the reader and that the critic’s job includes identifying works that fail this test.

In fact, you already have a critical theory (at least one) that you use to make sense of literature, even if you’re unaware of your theoretical stance. Some kind of principles guide you in determining what you expect a work to do, how you evaluate its performance, what you decide to say about it. (Even the absence of principles constitutes a theoretical position, as does the presence of contradictory principles.) The “elements” of literature, such as plot, character, point of view, are easy to understand; what is harder, and where more help is needed, is knowing what to say about such elements—how to approach them. In the following explanations and illustrations of the various critical approaches, you’ll get to see the “elements” in action. You’ll see, for instance, how New Criticism, psychological criticism, and deconstruction provide very different views of “character,” or “plot,” or “theme,” giving you a wider range of purposes and strategies in writing about literature.

To begin enhancing your awareness of literary criticism, take an inventory of what you already assume, asking yourself the following questions:

- What do I suppose is the function of literature? What do I look for in a literary work?
- What do I think is the function of writing about literature? What should literary criticism do?

- How do I believe the task of criticism is carried out? What strategies, routines, procedures, and activities do literary critics engage in?

As you try out the various approaches discussed here, you’ll be able to compare your own starting assumptions with some of the various options available. At the least, you’ll have a better understanding of the critical possibilities, allowing you to understand published criticism more readily; more likely, you’ll find yourself incorporating new strategies or stances into your writing about literature, enriching and deepening your insights.

“But isn’t such theoretical study too abstract and difficult for a student at my level?”

Such work is challenging at times, but it isn’t beyond your abilities: if you can understand this sentence, you can understand and use critical theories, and this book is intended to make such theory and practice clear and accessible. There are, to be sure, many controversies, variations, complexities, exceptions, and qualifications that are not treated here, and critical theory can be astonishingly difficult (and often just astonishing). After working through this book, you won’t find the writings of Jacques Derrida or Annette Kolodny easy to understand—just as an introduction to physics wouldn’t make the scientific papers of Steven Hawking or John Wheeler easy to comprehend. But an introduction can make the ideas of these specialists accessible: there’s no reason you shouldn’t be told about black holes or deconstruction simply because the theories, in all their specifics and intricacies, are difficult. Few people, if pressed, could explain even Isaac Newton’s physics in detail; but just about anyone can understand in a useful way how momentum and gravity work.

This text offers a basic, working understanding of critical theory and practice, freely acknowledging that a more advanced understanding is possible. I have tried hard to clarify without distorting, but some matters have no doubt been represented to be simpler than they are. This is, after all, an introduction.

“So what’s the plan here?”

Unfortunately, there’s no way a reasonably sized textbook (one without wheels and a handle) can cover adequately all the different kinds of criticism that can be identified today—even if I understood them all. Nor can any one particular theory in all its

mutations, combinations, and complexities be presented here. What I can do is provide a practical introduction to some of the most influential theories, leaving aside for now, and with considerable regret, some of the most interesting and exciting. My goal is to put you in a position to develop and refine your understanding, to move into other critical arenas, to evolve your own readings and even theories.

The plan is simple. The second chapter briefly visits all the approaches discussed here by applying them to a single passage. Then each of the next six chapters inhabits a single theory in some detail, again applying the theory to various passages and evolving essays step by step from each of the various critical stances. The ninth chapter deals with writing research papers. At the end of each chapter, you'll find a very select list of suggested further readings. I've annotated these items to give you a better sense of what's out there, and where you might want to go from here.

INTRODUCTION: RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

- Adler, Mortimer, and Charles Van Doren. *How to Read a Book*. Revised and updated. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972. Originally published in 1940, this book still offers valuable advice—on “How to Be a Demanding Reader,” “How to Use a Dictionary,” and much else. Chapter 15 deals with “Suggestions for Reading Stories, Plays, and Poems.”
- Danby, David. *Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996. An inspiring book for anyone embarking on serious literary studies: Danby, a movie critic, tells the story of his decision at age 48 to return to Columbia University and read great literature.
- Harmon, William, and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. 8th ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1999. If you want to know what the “Spasmodic School” was, or what a Spoonerism is, or the meaning of just about any other word related to literature, here's a handy place to look. There are many good handbooks, but this one is especially lucid and thorough.
- Lentricchia, Frank, and Thomas McLaughlin. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995. Somewhat

challenging but richly rewarding essays by leading scholars on various topics: “Representation,” “Structure,” “Writing,” “Narrative,” and so forth.

Trimble, John. *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2000. The best little book on writing I know. Many times I've assigned the first chapter to first-year English students, and they show up for the next class having read the whole book. If you're at all weak as a writer, or if you just want to get stronger, get this book. It's lively, fun, useful.