



## CHAPTER

# 2

## Critical Worlds

### *A Selective Tour*

"The question is," said Alice,  
"whether you can make words  
mean so many things."

"The question is," said Humpty  
Dumpty, "which is to be master—  
that's all."

—Lewis Carroll

This chapter begins to show you how critical theories work. The various approaches treated in this book are introduced here, and when you finish this chapter, you should expect to have a fairly good idea of each theory's most basic assumptions and strategies. (You'll find brief summaries inside the front cover). To allow you to compare and contrast the various theories, I apply each one to the same passage from Brendan Gill's *Here at The New Yorker*.

It's entirely possible that you are encountering critical theories for the first time, and your prior experience with literature may be limited; don't be dismayed if some of the terms and ideas are unfamiliar and a bit challenging. In subsequent chapters each approach and its use in the process of writing about literature will be explained in more detail. The brief excursions in this chapter are a preview, intended to raise questions as much as provide answers. You may well want to use this chapter as a review also, returning to it after you've read the other chapters.

## NEW CRITICISM

New Criticism (which is now decades old) focuses attention on the work itself, not the reader or the author. New Critics are not allergic to talking about the responses of readers or the intentions of authors, but they believe that the work itself ultimately must stand on its own. Talk of readers and authors is of secondary importance. The purpose of giving attention to the work itself is, first, to expose the work's unity. In a unified work, every element works together toward a theme. Every element is essential. In addition, the "close reading" (a phrase popularized by New Critics) of a literary work reveals its complexity. Great literature, New Critics assume, contains oppositions, ambiguities, ironies, tensions; these are unified by the work—if it is successful by the standards of New Criticism.

So how does one do New Criticism? Begin by reading closely. Since everything should contribute to the work's artistic unity—figures of speech, point of view, diction, imagery, recurrent ideas or events, and so forth—then careful analysis of any aspect of the work should be revealing. Look for oppositions, tensions, ambiguities. These add complexity to the work's unity. A mediocre work might be unified but have little complexity; or it might be complex but never really come together. The New Critic, finally, shows how the various elements of a great work unify it.

Let's see how New Criticism can be applied to a particular passage from *Here at The New Yorker* by Brendan Gill. The passage will be used to illustrate the other theories covered in this chapter, so you'll want to read it carefully, becoming familiar with it. Here's the passage:

When I started at *The New Yorker*, I felt an unshakable confidence in my talent and intelligence. I revelled in them openly, like a dolphin diving skyward out of the sea. After almost forty years, my assurance is less than it was; the revellings, such as they are, take place in becoming seclusion. This steady progress downward in the amount of one's confidence is a commonplace at the magazine—one might almost call it a tradition. Again and again, some writer who has made a name for himself in the world will begin to write for us and will discover as if for the first time how difficult writing is. The machinery of benign skepticism that surrounds and besets him in the form of editors, copy editors, and checkers, to say nothing of fellow-writers, digs a yawning

pit an inch or so beyond his desk. He hears it repeated as gospel that there are not three people in all America who can set down a simple declarative sentence correctly; what are the odds against his being one of this tiny elect?

In some cases, the pressure of all those doubting eyes upon his copy is more than the writer can bear. When the galleys of a piece are placed in front of him, covered with scores, perhaps hundreds, of pencilled hen-tracks of inquiry, suggestion, and correction, he may sense not the glory of creation but the threat of being stung to death by an army of gnats. Upon which he may think of nothing better to do than lower his head onto his blotter and burst into tears. Thanks to the hen-tracks and their consequences, the piece will be much improved, but the author of it will be pitched into a state of graver self-doubt than ever. Poor devil, he will type out his name on a sheet of paper and stare at it long and long, with dumb uncertainty. It looks—oh, Christ!—his name looks as if it could stand some working on.

As I was writing the above, Gardner Botsford, the editor who, among other duties, handles the copy for "Theatre," came into my office with the galleys of my latest play review in his hand. Wearing an expression of solemnity, he said, "I am obliged to inform you that Miss Gould has found a buried dangling modifier in one of your sentences." Miss Gould is our head copy editor and unquestionably knows as much about English grammar as anyone alive. Gerunds, predicate nominatives, and passive periphrastic conjugations are mother's milk to her, as they are not to me. Nevertheless, I boldly challenged her allegation. My prose was surely correct in every way. Botsford placed the galleys before me and indicated the offending sentence, which ran, "I am told that in her ninth decade this beautiful woman's only complaint in respect to her role is that she doesn't have enough work to do."

I glared blankly at the galleys. Humiliating enough to have buried a dangling modifier unawares; still more humiliating not to be able to disinter it. Botsford came to my rescue. "Miss Gould points out that as the sentence is written, the meaning is that the complaint is in its ninth decade and has, moreover, suddenly and unaccountably assumed the female gender." I said that in my opinion the sentence could only be made worse by being corrected—it was plain that "The only

complaint of this beautiful woman in her ninth decade . . .” would hang on the page as heavy as a sash-weight. “Quite so,” said Botsford. “There are times when to be right is wrong, and this is one of them. The sentence stands.” (7–8)

My New Critical reading of this passage was developed by reading carefully, marking up the text, asking myself questions, drafting answers to the questions, brainstorming and freewriting, and putting my ideas together. Although this reading didn’t just pop out of my head, it wasn’t a frustrating struggle because I knew what I was trying to do, and I was confident that my assumptions and strategies would produce something interesting. Specifically, I knew that a New Critical reading would identify some tension (or irony, or opposition) in the text, and some tensions in the story do seem pretty clear:

editor vs. writer  
 the world vs. *The New Yorker*  
 grammar vs. style  
 confidence vs. doubt  
 right vs. wrong

I also knew that such tensions must somehow be resolved if the text succeeds (by New Critical standards). Therefore, how the text ends is especially important from a New Critical perspective.

New Critics might have some trouble with the idea of an “ending” here, because the “work” I’ve chosen is not really a work, but rather an excerpt from a work. But for the purposes of demonstration, let’s imagine this passage stands alone, entitled “Writing a Wrong.” And since endings are crucial, I decided to focus on the reconciliation at the end, when Botsford pronounces “right is wrong,” which is reflected in the (hypothetical) title. As a New Critic, I then had to consider, “How does this idea—‘right is wrong’—unify or resolve the work in a complex or ambiguous way?” In other words, what conflicting ideas are at work in the passage that are brought into balance and harmony by this theme?

You’ll benefit most, I think, if you try to sketch out your own New Critical reading before (and perhaps after) you read mine.

### The Paradoxical Unity of “Writing A Wrong”

In Brendan Gill’s story of a dangling modifier, “Writing a Wrong,” the editor Botsford solves the conflict between Miss Gould’s rules and Gill’s taste. He does so by offering a paradox that unifies Gill’s story: sometimes “right is wrong,”

Botsford says. It turns out that Miss Gould was right to spot the error, but Gill was right to have written the sentence as he did. The irony of this solution is reinforced by various paradoxical images in the story.

For example, the dolphin in the second sentence is “diving skyward.” This action simultaneously suggests a downward movement (“diving”) and an upward motion (“skyward”). The description thus embodies the same sort of logic as a wrong rightness. Likewise, the “progress downward” of the writer and even his “becoming seclusion” (“becoming”—attractive and appealing to others; “seclusion”—unknown to others) convey the same kind of image. In larger terms, the writer’s “unshakable confidence” quickly becomes a “dumb uncertainty”—which again suggests the kind of reversal that resolves the story.

In such an upside-down world we would expect to find imagery of struggle and violence, and we do encounter a “yawning pit” and an “army of gnats.” Such tension is harmonized by Gill’s brilliant conclusion: in writing, conducted properly, the demands of correctness and style are unified by the writer’s poetic instincts. Similarly, the story itself is resolved by the notion of a correct error.

## READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

Reader-response criticism starts from the idea that the critic’s interest ultimately ought to be focused on the reader rather than the text itself or the author. Without readers, it seems safe to say, there would be little reason to talk about literature; it is the reader who brings the text to life, who gives it meaning. Otherwise, it’s just black marks on a white page.

The reader-response critic focuses on the reader’s activity in one of two ways: by describing how readers *should* respond to the text or by giving the critic’s own personal response. That is, the reader-response critic either is claiming to be describing what is “normal,” or conventional, or ideal, or implied by the text; or the critic is expressing that which is personal, subjective, perhaps even eccentric. One could argue that reader-response critics are always engaging in subjective response, even when they think they’re objectively describing “the” response. In any event, reader-response critics tend to deal with works eliciting responses that are somehow noteworthy.

How does one do reader-response criticism? If the goal is to offer a personal, subjective response, one simply reads the text and responds. As you can imagine, such a strategy has been especially popular because it really liberates the reader. It's difficult to see how any response could be wrong: who could say, No, that isn't your response? Some responses may seem richer than others; some responses may seem to deal more fully with the text; some responses may seem more authentic and honest than others. But any particular response may well help another reader to a more interesting or satisfying experience of the work.

If the idea is to describe how a reader *ought* to respond, which might better be called "reader-reception" criticism, then you'll need to try to suppress whatever is personal in your response and offer instead an "ideal" response, one that is (or rather ought to be) shared by all attentive and intelligent readers. Describing in careful detail the slow-motion progress of a hypothetical reader through the text, such "objective" or receptive reader-response criticism may consider these kinds of questions: What expectations does the text create? What happens to those expectations? (Are they met, undermined, exploited, transformed, denied?) What literary conventions does the text employ to affect the reader? How, in other words, does the text shape the reader's response?

Although I'm presenting these two versions of reader-response criticism as oppositions, flip sides of a single coin, it may be more accurate and helpful to see them in terms of a progression. Reader-response critics unavoidably must use their own personal responses as a starting point for talking about how the ideal, or implied, or common reader responds; but the close examination of such "ideal" responses would seem inevitably to reveal some personal and subjective features. (No one, I would suggest, not even the author, can be *the* ideal reader.)

At this point, before we get any deeper into the question of whether reader-response criticism is unavoidably subjective, let's see how the theory applies to our passage.

The following essay tries to present a record of my movement through this passage. It was fairly easy and fun to write because I simply read through the passage slowly and asked myself, "Okay, how am I responding now? What does this make me think? What am I expecting next?" Although I decided that the passage was continually surprising me, I would not argue that surprise is the only or the correct response: I might have focused on the passage's humor, on a pervading sense of doom, or something else. That's

the beauty of reader-response criticism: different responses. As a piece of reader-response criticism, this essay strives to be neither rabidly subjective nor dogmatically objective. I focus on my personal response, but I also try to play the reader's role that I believe Gill has imagined. I quote the text repeatedly, trying to show my reader exactly what I'm responding to.

### **The Reader's Surprise in an Excerpt From *Here at The New Yorker***

Beginning with its first sentence, the story of the buried dangling modifier in Brendan Gill's *Here at The New Yorker* is continually surprising, setting up expectations and then knocking them down. Gill begins the first sentence with "When I started at The New Yorker," and I naturally expect him to talk about how nervous and insecure he was starting off at one of the largest and most famous magazines in the world. Instead, Gill refers to his "unshakable confidence." The third sentence begins with "After almost forty years," leading me to expect some explanation of how his joy at the magazine has grown. But forty years of experience, it turns out, have not developed Gill's confidence and happiness. Instead, his "assurance is less than it was." How, I must wonder, has he managed to work there for forty years and yet grow less confident?

Expecting Gill to explain the oddity of his deteriorating confidence, I find, surprisingly, that such an effect "is a commonplace at the magazine," a "tradition" even. Since the loss of confidence occurs for everyone, we might then expect that *The New Yorker* staff sticks together, sharing insecurities and supporting each other. Such is hardly the case, as Gill continues to surprise me by tracing one imaginary writer's loss of confidence to the point of what appears to be a nervous breakdown. The writer, who is said to have "made a name for himself in the world," is reduced to weeping on his blotter and trying to revise his name. Such is not what I expect from a famous writer.

Given this tradition of disaster, it seems clear to me that Gardner Botsford is appearing in the third paragraph to star in the story of Gill's own downfall. Botsford points to a major error Gill has made, and Gill's assertion that he "boldly challenged" the allegation seems to set him up for a major humiliation. "Unshakable" confidence and bold challenges certainly seem unwarranted in the atmosphere of *The New*

*Yorker*. But, once more, Gill crosses me up and provides a story of triumph. Rather than undermining his confidence, which is what everything in the story suggests will happen, Botsford becomes Gill's champion. "The sentence stands," he says, as the last reversal provides a happy ending.

## DECONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

Think, for starters, of deconstructive criticism as the mirror image of New Criticism: whereas New Criticism aims to reveal the coherence and unity of the work, deconstruction aims to expose the gaps, the incoherences, the contradictions of the text. Deconstructive critics assume these gaps are present because of what they assume about the nature of language. Specifically, they notice that language makes meaning by oppositions: we know what "good" means because it is the opposite of "bad"; "tired" means something to us because it is the opposite of "rested." So words make sense because of their relationship *to other words*, not because of any "natural" grounding in reality. Although we may like to think "bad" and "rested" refer to something solid and real, they don't. "Bad" has come to mean "good" in certain contexts. It could come to mean "blue," or "hungry," or anything. "Rested" with regard to a fighter pilot during combat may mean "having had three hours' sleep in the last twenty-four." Meaning is relative and relational.

Deconstruction aims (among other things) to remind us of the arbitrary and unstable nature of language by taking texts apart—undoing them until we see how a text inevitably contradicts itself, containing traces of its opposite or "other." Any effort to explain deconstruction is therefore doomed according to the theory itself. Any effort to say *anything*, in fact, must go astray. Such an assumption could be dismaying, but many deconstructive critics have chosen to adopt a mischievously comic and even shocking stance. Although deconstructive criticism can be very difficult to read (perhaps as an illustration of how language eventually fails?), it can also be very amusing and engaging.

Thus, deconstructing a text calls for careful reading and a bit of creativity, but it's often revealing and even fun. One way to think of your goal as a deconstructive critic is that you're trying to turn the text against itself. For instance, Botsford's concluding decision, "The sentence stands," may appear to be reassuring. Here is a case where a writer makes a mistake, but the mistake turns out to be okay. If we were to press this reading, however, asking if the text

might say something other than what it appears to say, we may begin to move into the realm of deconstruction. If you are a student in a writing-about-literature class, I suspect that Gill's passage is only superficially comforting. If a writer at *The New Yorker* can't always tell whether a sentence is right or wrong—if in fact the rules of writing are so complex that not even three people in America "can set down a simple declarative sentence correctly"—then how is a college student to feel? If a grown man and an established writer is weeping onto his desk blotter and considering revising his name, then how can the ordinary student hope to write an error-free paper—especially when the rules seem to apply in one case and not in another, and the rules for determining such exceptions don't seem to exist but are instead invented and applied by those who happen to be in charge? Writing becomes a nightmare.

In fact, Botsford's "reassuring" vindication is deceptive, for he does not actually say that sometimes right is wrong and wrong is right. He only says that sometimes "right is wrong." Isn't wrong also usually wrong? But Botsford's apparent reversal of the dismantling of authors at *The New Yorker* is finally ambiguous, since we never know if the writer is ever correct, no matter what he does: "The sentence stands" indeed, but it stands with its error intact, a monument to Gill's inability to correct it and to the inevitable errors of writing. A monument to the way language masters us.

Although deconstructive critics may well deal with obviously major features of a text, like its ending, they may also choose some marginal element of the text and vigorously explore its oppositions, reversals, and ambiguities. In fact, for some critics, deconstruction is simply a name for "close reading" of an especially rigorous kind. The deconstructive critic, for example, might well decide to concentrate on the assertion that because of the editors' merciless correction, "the piece will be much improved." A New Critic, I think, would not be very likely to consider this assertion central, the key to the passage. But a deconstructive critic might. Here is what happened when I turned around the idea that "the piece will be much improved" and questioned it.

### "The Sentence Stands" Triumphant: A Deconstructive Reading

Gill's anecdote clearly sets the world's writers against the editors, and the latter control the game. The editors and their accomplices, the checkers and copy editors, get to say what is wrong. They get to dig the "yawning pit" in front of the helpless writer's desk; they determine the "tiny elect" who can

write correctly; they make the scores and hundreds of “hen-tracks” on the writer’s manuscript, which serve as testimony to the incompetence of writers, the near-impossibility of writing, and the arbitrary power of the editor.

To be sure, it is acknowledged that these editorial assaults upon the writer serve their purpose, for “thanks to the hen-tracks and their consequences, the piece will be much improved.” But the cost is terrible. Not only is the writer unable to write his own name with any confidence; he has become a “poor devil,” outside “the elect.” In delivering his writing over to the editors, conceding their dominance, the writer inevitably places his own identity, perhaps even his very soul, in jeopardy. Thus, the cry, “oh Christ!” comes to be an invocation to the only power who can save the writer from the devil and the editor’s destructive forces.

In fact, this story of the errors of writing actually reveals that the kingdom of editors is based upon a lie: it simply is not true, despite the beleaguered writer’s admission under torture, that “the piece will be much improved” by editorial intervention. Miss Gould’s enormous grammatical lore does not improve the piece at all; her effort nearly made it “worse.” And Botsford’s contribution involves simply leaving the piece as it was written—a strange method of improvement. This instance, in other words, suggests that the writer need not approach falling apart in order to compose his writing.

At the same time, Gill can never again become like the gill-less dolphin of the first paragraph, confidently “diving skyward,” because the dangling modifier remains: it is a part of the sea of language the author cannot leave. In the end, both writer and editor are defeated by their inability to control their language. The status of the writer at *The New Yorker* becomes a paradigm for the alarming status of writing itself: deceptive, mute, and intractable, “the sentence stands,” neither improved nor made worse, standing really for nothing.

## BIOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, AND NEW HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Biographical and historical critics begin from the commonsensical notion that there is certainly something “outside the text” and that these biographical and historical facts help us to make sense

of literature. Biographical and historical critics have at least two compelling reasons to exist. First, such criticism is often fascinating. We want to know what authors were like as persons, what kinds of lives they led, even if such information doesn’t directly help us understand their works—although often it does. And second, we cannot take for granted that we know what authors might reasonably expect their initial audiences to know. By reconstructing the past, understanding the historical context of a work, we’re able to see more clearly through the lens of the author’s time.

Biographical and historical criticism thus seek rather direct connections between authors and works, between historical events and works: this happened, which affected this, which affected that. New historical criticism starts from a different (a new) view of history, one much more compatible with Jacques Derrida’s assertion that “there is nothing outside the text” (158). Historical events, new historicists observe, are nothing more than texts now. Any event has meaning because of its place within a system of meaning. Rather than moving through time, showing us how one thing led to another, new historicists are more likely to take a slice of time and analyze it as a system, studying the relationship of one thing to another. If you think of history as a movie, biographical and historical critics watch the movie in the usual fashion, trying to figure out the plot, keeping track of the characters. A new historical critic may select one frame of the film, carefully analyzing minute details, and then compare that frame to another one ten minutes later, showing the radical differences between the two. Whereas traditional historians see connections, new historians see ruptures and revolutions.

I’ll illustrate briefly the way that history can be used to write about literature by employing a biographical stance.

### On Brendan Gill’s Career and an Excerpt From *Here at The New Yorker*

This passage from Brendan Gill’s *Here at The New Yorker* is a kind of meditation on his own career. Gill begins with confidence yet seems to deteriorate, like everyone else who writes at the magazine, into profound self-doubt. According to the entry on Gill in *Contemporary Authors*, he started his career at *The New Yorker* in 1936—“almost forty years ago,” as he says in the passage, published in 1975. Thus, his “unshakable” optimism seems even more remarkable for

arising in the midst of the Depression, with failure and fear of failure rampant all around him.

When Gill begins to tell in detail how his "assurance is less than it was," he shifts to third person, seemingly illustrating his own fortunes at the same time that he shows us everyone else's. It is not, however, Gill who has his head on the blotter in the second paragraph, but the hypothetical writer. Some investigation into Gill's life suggests, in fact, that this hypothetical writer does not stand for Gill, even though that may seem at first to be the case. Gill only says "my assurance is less than it was"; he doesn't say "I was reduced to tears."

Elsewhere in *Here at The New Yorker*, Gill writes, "I am always so ready to take a favorable view of my powers that even when I am caught out and made a fool of, I manage to twist this circumstance about until it becomes a proof of how exceptional I am" (62). This statement fits the story of the dangling modifier nicely. Although Gill says he is humiliated by his error, such a reaction seems unreasonable and unlikely. He does manage to twist his error around to be "a proof" of his "exceptional" ability: his error is an exception, a correct error. Gill's use of "humiliating" thus appears, especially in light of this other statement, to be an exaggeration for comic effect.

Another comment by Gill, reflecting on his career, further suggests that his story of profound self-doubt and humiliation is not to be taken literally: "I started out at the place where I wanted most to be and with much pleasure and very little labor have remained here since." The writer with "hundreds" of "hen-tracks of inquiry," endlessly revising even his name, does not seem to be experiencing "much pleasure" or "very little labor." Gill's autobiographical "Foreword" to *A New York Life* also indicates that his troubles in the passage under consideration are largely for effect. For one thing, Gill explains in the "Foreword" how the metaphorical nature of language so delighted him as a child that he perceived at age "five or six" that he would be a writer. He was thrilled to find, he says, that the "ladyfingers" his mother served weren't really *ladies'* fingers. Gill's real outlook, as he presents it, seems more like that of the dolphin in his opening paragraph than that of the poor anxiety-driven writer. Reference to Gill's life thus emphasizes for us the hypothetical (not historical) and

comic (not tragic) nature of the writer's struggles in the passage.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Anyone whose writing is evaluated will be intrigued, I think, by what Gill's passage implies about the psychological effects of criticism. You too may have felt at some point the discomfort of "pencilled hen-tracks of inquiry, suggestion, and correction." The passage provides a good opportunity to consider how such feelings arise and what purpose, if any, they serve. You don't, in other words, have to be a psychologist in order to do psychological criticism. Common sense and an interest in human thinking and behavior are the only essentials.

Still, psychological concepts can be valuable and stimulating in writing about literature. Take, for instance, the idea put forward by Sigmund Freud that creative writing is like dreaming: both allow wishes or fears to be fulfilled that would otherwise be suppressed. A desire or a fear too powerful to be confronted directly can be disguised by the unconscious and expressed by the author or dreamer, Freud said. One possible task of the psychological critic, then, like the psychologist, would be to decode what is being disguised. The critic may make educated guesses about what has been repressed and transformed by the author, or by characters, or even by other readers.

Another useful psychological concept is the idea that there are basic patterns of human development, even though everyone's formative history is different in particulars. One of the most famous and controversial of these developmental concepts is Freud's idea of the Oedipus complex. In Greek myth, Oedipus was the man who unknowingly murdered his father and married his mother. For Freud, this myth depicted the infantile desire experienced by all little boys, who want to see the mother as the principal object of their affections and resent sharing her with the father. The Oedipus complex comes about when this sensual desire for the mother is not suppressed. And the vehicle for this suppression, Freud argued, is the young boy's recognition that the father is more powerful. Rather than lose his capability for pleasure, the boy pulls back from his focus on the mother and eventually turns his desires elsewhere. At its most instinctual level, Freud maintained, the threat to the boy's sexuality is perceived as a threat to that which determines his sex: it is ultimately a fear of castration that motivates the boy's withdrawal.

Although many of Freud's ideas, including the Oedipus complex, have been vigorously challenged or revised, his work did form the basis for modern psychology. Many of his ideas are so well known that any educated person can be expected to be familiar with them. It would be difficult to go very far toward understanding psychology or psychological criticism today without some awareness of Freud, who relied heavily on literature in developing his ideas. By no means, however, should you infer that psychological criticism means Freudian criticism. Other approaches are welcome. But since an introduction to psychology isn't practical here, I've elected to indicate simply how psychological concepts can be applied by using Freud, who is arguably the most important single figure. If you can apply Freud, you can apply Abraham Maslow or Carl Rogers or whomever.

The following essay was developed primarily by applying Freud's central theory of the Oedipus complex to Gill's passage.

#### A Psychological Reading of Gill's Passage

Writers are brought into the world by editors, and Brendan Gill is thus in a sense the product of Miss Gould and Gardner Botsford's union. Gardner Botsford imposes the grammatical law in a fatherly enough way, but his counterpart, Miss Gould, functions only as a kind of uncreating anti-mother: she is a "Miss," and her notion of "mother's milk" is truly indigestible—"gerunds, predicate nominatives, and passive periphrastic conjugations." She nurtures neither writing nor writer.

But, at the same time, the well-being of the writers at *The New Yorker* depends on her approval because, like Gill, they have accepted the criterion of correctness as the law of the father. Miss Gould imposes that law to the letter, undermining the writer's self-esteem until finally his very identity is threatened, plunging him into such "self-doubt" that his name is called into question. He may then become an orphan; his work may be abandoned.

In fact, the source of the writer's neurotic breakdown seems to be the linking of self to writing. Although the many corrections are imprinted upon the paper, Gill shifts them to the writer and transforms them from "pencilled hen-tracks" into stings. It is not, as we might suppose, the particular work that may be attacked so much that it dies, but rather *the writer* who may be "stung to death by an army of gnats." Gnats do not, so far as I know anyway, have stingers; they bite. The

displacement here, one might argue, is the result of the writer's sense of personal vulnerability, making the threat more plausible since being bitten to death by gnats sounds absurd, while being stung is more ominous.

The more serious threat to Gill's identity is posed by Botsford, his editor and symbolic father. Botsford enters the scene with Gill's review "in his hand." Part of the review has been illegally "buried" and may subsequently be removed. This threat to Gill's writing is a disguised fear of castration because the writer identifies with his writing. The writer's identity, his name, is crucial to his potency. His name is the key to his ability to reproduce and promulgate himself. Yet, his name "looks as if it could stand some working on."

Gill recognizes then that his editorial parent may correct and improve his "piece," but the cost may be terrible, for the piece may be taken over by the authorities who control the emissions of his pen. Gill's image for what he has lost, the dolphin, thus becomes a rather blatant phallic symbol, reemerging as the pen (the grammatical penis) that the "dumb" writer loses. In other words, the writer must give up his "piece" to be published, to survive as a writer, but he is no longer the writer.

We now may see the psychological fittingness of the error Miss Gould finds: it is a structure that is "dangling." The writer may see his own fate in the sentence that sticks out, for it has suddenly "assumed the female gender." The writer's castration anxiety emerges here: he has desired to please Miss Gould, but focusing on grammar and correctness will render him impotent and emasculated. Thus, Gill's story works to resolve his Oedipus complex by pointing out the advantages of accepting the values of the father (Botsford) and shifting his desire from Miss Gould to a more appropriate object: the reader. Gill evades symbolic castration. "The sentence stands," the father says, saving the writer's pen (is).

#### FEMINIST CRITICISM

Feminist criticism generally assumes, like reader-response criticism, that a literary work is shaped by our reading of it, and this reading is influenced by our own status, which includes significantly gender, or our attitude toward gender. But, as feminists point out, since the production and reception of literature has been controlled largely



by men, the role of gender in reading and writing has been slighted. The interests and achievements of half of the human race have been neglected—or appreciated largely from only one sex's point of view.

You don't have to consider yourself a feminist to benefit from feminist criticism. Simply taking gender into account, regardless of your social and political views, is likely to open your eyes to important works, authors, and issues you would have missed otherwise.

Although it is difficult to generalize, given the diversity and development of feminist criticism in recent decades, there are some basic strategies you can adopt. You'll want to consider the significance of the gender of the author and the characters. You'll want to observe how sexual stereotypes might be reinforced or undermined in the work. How does the work reflect or alter the place of women (and men) in society? Perhaps most powerful, imagine yourself reading the work as a woman. If you happen to be female, this last suggestion may seem easy enough; but feminist critics point out that women have long been taught to read like men or to ignore their own gender. So, reading as a woman, even if you are a woman, may be easier said than done.

I developed the following feminist reading of Gill's passage by noticing references to gender and paying attention to any potential stereotypes.

#### A Feminist Reading of The Gill Passage

We know not all the writers at *The New Yorker* were men, even during the period Brendan Gill discusses in this passage from *Here at The New Yorker*. When he speaks of "some writer who has made a name for himself in the world," and about the editorial "machinery" that besets "him," Gill is of course referring to writers in the generic sense. One may still assert today, although with less assurance than in 1975, that "himself" and "him" in this passage include "herself" and "her."

Such a claim, that one sexual marker includes its opposite, may seem absurd—as if "white" included "black" or "communist" included "democratic." But the motivations for such a claim are suggested even in this brief passage, for Gill's story not only contains this obvious bias in pronouns, still accepted by some editors and writers; the story also conveys more subtle messages about sexuality and sexual roles.

For example, Miss Gould functions as a familiar stereotype: the finicky spinster, a Grammar Granny, who has devoted her life to "English grammar" and its enforcement.

She is a copy editor, subservient to the male editor and writer, and her lack of imagination and taste, as Gill presents them, seem to testify to the wisdom of this power structure.

This division of labor—male/creative, female/menial—is subtly reinforced by the reference to the "hen-tracks" that cover the writer's galley. Petty correction is the realm of the hen, the feminine. But these "*hen-tracks*" (they could not be rooster tracks) are more than aggravating correction; they come to threaten the writer's very identity. In attempting to produce "his copy," the writer is in a sense attempting to reproduce himself. The "glory of creation" is his literary procreation, and thus Miss Gould's effort to remove a particular sentence is a symbolic threat to cut off some more essential part of the writer. It is, after all, a "dangling modifier" that she has located; and this dangling structure is in danger of being fed to the "yawning pit," symbolic of the feminine editing and its excising dangers. Thus, men should fear women, the passage suggests. Do not give women power.

Because Gill's initial image for the writer starting out at the magazine, the dolphin in the sea, derives some of its power from the well-established association of the ocean and the womb, the images of the "yawning" pit, not to mention the poisonous "mother's milk," become more telling. Even the error itself is subtly connected to the feminine, for the problem with the sentence is that part of it has "assumed the female gender." That part, in the context of nagging copy editors who chop up one's prose, can only be a "complaint."

The nonagenarian's complaint itself seems significant: in the mode of feminine busybodies like Miss Gould, she laments not having "enough work to do." Miss Gould, similarly overzealous, has herself done more work than is reasonable, and Botsford's pronouncement that "The sentence stands" returns her to her place, negating her feminine fussiness.

#### OTHER APPROACHES

To give you some sense of just how rich and varied the critical universe is, let me mention just a few other approaches not treated very substantially here.

There could have been a chapter here on criticism that focuses on the economic and class structures involved in literature

(sometimes called “Marxist” criticism). The feminist reading above does include some interest in money, class, and power, but these features could conceivably be brought to the forefront. The various forms of historical criticism are also necessarily concerned to some extent with class and power.

There might have been a chapter covering ethical criticism. I think it is easy to see how Gill’s passage could spark rewarding ethical analysis. It may be seen, for instance, to raise the issue of the cultural implications of determining that right is sometimes wrong or the ethical consequences of setting up a standard that virtually no one can meet.

A critic interested in religious issues might wonder if the reference to “this tiny elect” in Gill’s passage signals the importance of religious values or their trivialization. Likewise, what does the reference to “oh, Christ!” tell us? Is Botsford a Christ figure, forgiving Gill for his sins?

African-American criticism of this passage might start from the question of the role race plays in this passage and indeed in *The New Yorker* of the time. Do any *New Yorker* advertisements from the 1970s feature African Americans? Do we assume that any of the characters in Gill’s tale are black? Do we even assume that any of them might be black? What difference does our assumption make? In this respect, one might suggest, the passage reads *us*, perhaps showing us some of our racially motivated assumptions. If you were to do a reader-response criticism of the passage, would your racial or ethnic status play any part in your reading?

These and other approaches have vitalized the study of literature in the past few decades. In an ideal world, an introduction to writing about literature would include every identifiable approach. The goal of this introduction is necessarily more limited: using a sampling of the most visible approaches, it aims to show you how theory shapes practice—how assumptions stimulate and guide the process of developing critical essays. This goal is still an ambitious one, but well worth your effort, providing a powerful passport to the various ways meaning is made, preparing you for these and other kinds of literary excursions.

## WORKS CITED

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. G. C. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.

Gill, Brendan. *Here at The New Yorker*. New York: Random House, 1975.  
———. *A New York Life*. New York: Poseidon, 1990.

## RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEWS

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995. A lively (sometimes eccentric) and genuinely useful introduction, including good questions and exercises for students.
- Bressler, Charles. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1999. An excellent advanced introduction, including a nice historical survey of criticism, a chapter on “Cultural Studies,” information on websites, and sample essays and excerpts from students and professionals.
- Carpenter, Scott. *Reading Lessons: An Introduction to Theory*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2000. This is “not a how-to manual,” Carpenter says, refusing to “present recipes for producing” different kinds of criticism. He does, however, provide an often entertaining overview that includes website resources and films.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1996. Witty and opinionated, the first introduction to theory. For advanced students.
- Liu, Alan, ed. *Voice of the Shuttle Website on Literary Theory*. <http://vos.uscb.edu/shuttle/english.html>. This website contains pages introducing various topics—hypertext fiction, cyberculture, gender studies, deconstruction, etc. Also a good portal to other electronic resources.
- Selden, Raman, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brocker. *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1997. Detailed and authoritative introductions to ten theories, including “Russian Formalism,” “Marxist Theories,” “Postcolonialist Theories,” and “Gay, Lesbian and Queer Theories.”
- Webster, Roger. *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Arnold, 1998. An elegant and concise (138 pages) overview.