



CHAPTER

3

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 this century, “traditional” criticism has in large part been 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 still 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 (1926)

Archibald MacLeish

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb (not spoken)
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

couplets
and rhymes
=
poem flow
image

5

→ rhyme pattern change

10

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.

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 a 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.

Theory
of Poetry

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 radically 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," Wellek 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 Lowes' 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 certainly 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 the best, it remains an exciting and revealing strategy for unfolding literary works.

HOW TO DO NEW CRITICISM

You may already have a pretty good idea how to apply New Criticism, but 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)?

Let's examine each step.

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 concrete 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's 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's 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's 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.

These steps won't read the poem for you, nor will they supply the sort of imagination, creativity, and attention you'll need to read literature closely. They will help to structure your process of reading and writing. To give you a better idea of how to use these principles, I 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 (1945)

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. 5
 You will never neglect or beat
 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.

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. I know what the speaker means, but an abortion is a medical procedure; it can't make "you" remember or keep "you" from forgetting. Assuming that this phrasing is significant, why doesn't the speaker just say "You can't forget about your abortion"? This question raises another one: 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.

As you think about the poem, putting your ideas on paper, 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 you could end up spending a semester on this poem. Further, adopting a New Critical stance, you will assume that the poem itself will reveal whatever it is essential for you to know.

Of course, once you decide to limit your attention to the poem itself as an object, you need some principles to guide your reading. It isn’t really that helpful just to say, “Concentrate on the poem itself and read it closely.” 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 nonmother is resolved at the end of the poem with her declaration of her 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 first 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 to 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.

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

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.

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 the preceding 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 two poems and some sample questions.

forgiving my father (1969)

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.

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 (1982)

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
fight the best of all the village boys. 20

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*.

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?

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RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING: NEW CRITICISM

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