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“A Richer, Not a Narrower, Aesthetic”: The Rise of New Criticism in *English Journal*

A teacher and member of the NCTE Task Force on Council History and 2011 uses discussion of New Criticism in EJ to examine how literary criticism has been implemented in classrooms and how it might be developed in the 21st century.

Literary criticism in the form of the so-called book report, may, therefore,” wrote Stephen Bloore in 1934, “be a most valuable aid to independent thought if it is not used merely to check up on the books supposedly read by a student” (330).

For a century, *English Journal* has been a map and a narrative of the discourse about teaching ELA as well as the daily classroom practices informing that discourse. Two of the threads that have run throughout that history are how we view literary criticism and how we teach our students to respond to literature.

Writing in 1986, just a few years into the current accountability era spawned by *A Nation at Risk* and codified by No Child Left Behind, Robert W. Blake and Anna Lunn stated:

It seems to us that the single most powerful influence on teaching literature has been the New Criticism (sometimes called Formalistic Criticism and often mistakenly lumped together with other approaches under the label of Objective Criticism) of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. If we read a poem as a New Critic, we are implicitly guided by assumptions like these: interpretation means discovering the objective meaning of a piece, determining the author’s intended meaning, and reading and responding objectively to the place itself, not to the biography of the writer or to the cultural or social history of the time in which it was created. (68)

My career as an ELA teacher began in 1984, and I find their assertion accurate for then. I also be-

lieve New Criticism has remained a “powerful influence,” if not an increased influence, due to the implicit call for a New Criticism norm within the Advanced Placement Literature and Composition courses and exam as well as the rise of technical approaches to literature driven by standards, testing, and accountability. The technical and purported objective and text-based qualities within New Criticism lend themselves well to quantifying literacy and reading on selected-response assessments.

I also find Blake and Lunn’s claim personally significant because I still own the Brooks and Warren 1962 third edition of *Understanding Poetry* that I viewed as a sort of Bible when I first began teaching. (I also owned their *Understanding Fiction*, although I no longer can place my hands on that copy.) The discussion about New Criticism that runs through *English Journal* provides an opportunity to examine New Criticism being implemented in our classrooms as an often unspoken norm of authoritative texts and interpretations, the implementation of New Criticism in high school classrooms as it contrasts with the vibrant argument within and about New Criticism and all literary criticism, and the call to examine the challenges offered by reader-response (Rosenblatt) and critical literacy as they inform the needs of 21st-century students.

Literary Criticism as “Good Thinking about Books”

Stephen Bloore made this essential claim in 1934: “Good literary criticism is good thinking about books” (328). He then offered a basic formula—

four questions to guide students in their analysis of a text. This discussion from eight decades ago offered a reasonable and thoughtful discussion about helping students “make [their] own analysis”:

The question of the value of a particular piece of literature will always be highly personal. . . . Its consideration by the student, however, will lead, not necessarily to some set standard of value in literature, but to a knowledge of what others have found valuable and of why they have judged it to be so. Thus the student may be induced to be reasonable about his own standards when he gets them. And that should be the aim of all teaching. . . . [T]he secondary school may well insist upon extensive as well as intensive reading. (329)

The sentiments here are likely typical of those by many teachers of ELA today, but this piece offers for us the historical debates about *how* to merge the personal responses to literature with systematic literary analysis and *who* makes the decision about what interpretation matters.

While teachers of ELA struggled with introducing their students to thoughtful and systematic text analysis, Morton Dauwen Zabel detailed the state of literary criticism at the close of the 1930s. Zabel’s detailed examination of American literary criticism offered a glimpse into rising influence coming from the New Critics—John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren: “Lately these critics have found a new organ in the *Kenyon Review*, under Ransom’s editorship, whose emphasis on the aesthetic discipline promises to make it an important medium of literary education in the coming decade” (426). With a notable dose of skepticism, Warren Beck in 1943 revealed an equally powerful dynamic that would prove essential to New Criticism becoming the de facto norm of examining texts in formal schooling throughout the United States: Literary critics established the criteria for “literary” fiction—as that contrasts with “popular” fiction—and successful writers both embraced and perpetuated those standards; then, the authority of the classroom inculcated in students that the standards (i.e., New Criticism) were powerful because they could be found in the high-quality texts authorized in the classroom.

One of the significant patterns in the discussions about literary criticism in *English Journal* in the first half of the 20th century is that the field

of literary criticism and the pedagogy for teaching textual analysis to students were in tense debate. This was a fertile time of argument and thought, but that organic and rich debate failed to reach the classroom as the teaching of literary analysis embraced a narrow and mechanical version of literary criticism—specifically New Criticism. Oscar Cargill, in fact, lambasted the state of literary criticism in 1945:

[W]e have no cause to rejoice in either the contrivances or the accomplishments of our critics. . . . To harmonize with poetry, fiction, and the drama—to be an art—criticism must take as its first object the delight of the reader, not his information or his discipline, save as these are incidental to his delight. (64, 65)

Cargill’s concern for criticism as an art and the delight of the reader clearly established education goals that perpetuated mechanical and decontextualized approaches to text. Soon after Cargill’s challenges to criticism, Bertha Handlan focused on the failure of the classroom, targeting her characterization that free reading was dominating the classroom and cheating students:

Free reading is unguided reading. . . . Possibly the description does not fit the program in your school, but it is an accurate, fair description of what goes on in nine out of ten high schools that I have visited in the past few years. (182)

Handlan’s call for “a carefully *guided* program of reading” (186; italics in original) matches a persistent debate in the teaching of literature for decades, but her commentary from 1946 raises the question of how the field moved from her characterization of ELA classrooms dominated by “unguided reading” to Blake and Lunn’s acknowledging the pervasiveness of New Criticism just 40 years later.

As we approached the mid-20th century, the pages of *English Journal* revealed that literary criticism was a vibrant debate, but how any critical lens manifested itself in the classroom was just as

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important. Was Handlan accurately characterizing how reader response (Rosenblatt) was misunderstood and poorly implemented? Is the record on the dominance of New Criticism actually a narrative about it being misunderstood and poorly implemented as well?

New Criticism: Defined and Embraced, Narrowly

At mid-20th century, New Criticism was well defined (Eagleton) and in a state of flux from within its ranks and from its critics. William Van O'Connor acknowledged both and offered further:

Most of them [New Critics] would probably agree that the critic should (1) center his attention on the literary work itself, (2) study the various problems arising from examining relationships between a subject matter and the final form of a work, and (3) consider ways in which the moral and philosophical elements get into or are related to the literary work. (489)

This brief definition parallels in many ways the list of questions from Bloore in 1934 and how most students have been instructed to approach text as the *correct* way to interpret and identify high-quality literature.

O'Connor presented a detailed and rich discussion of the leading New Critics and the disagreements and nuances in the movement, including this concern: "The obvious danger in the effort of the new criticism to set up criteria is that such criteria could become frozen or rigid" (491–92). Another key element in O'Connor's discussion was the importance of identifying technique at the heart of New Criticism: "Meter, diction, and alliteration are not only a part of the form; they are a part of the meaning" (492). Throughout the essay, the tensions among New Critics were highlighted by O'Connor, including the central tension between setting standards of excellence and avoiding scripts or templates that result in formulaic texts and responses to texts. Ultimately, O'Connor noted:

In other words, the new critics, like the cultural historians, are concerned with the rise of science and the decline of religion in the post-Renaissance world. As literary critics, they are concerned with the ways these developments are manifest in language and in literary forms. (497)

As further evidence of the organic and contradictory nature of just what constituted New Criticism—especially as that contrasts the fixed nature of how literary criticism has been taught in ELA classrooms—was David Daiches's response to O'Connor, a challenge coming from a critic who benefitted from New Criticism's prominence. Daiches focused on what he felt were omissions in O'Connor's endorsement of New Criticism: "it shows an insufficient awareness of possible alternatives to that 'new' approach which regards the primary problem in the critical examination of a work as the demonstration of its 'internal consistency'" (64). Quoting T. S. Eliot, Daiches then considered the possibility of focusing on criticism to the exclusion of reading for pleasure, a sentiment voiced by Paulo Freire five decades later:

If studying were not almost always a *burden* to us, if reading were not a bitter obligation, if, on the contrary, studying and reading were sources of pleasure and happiness as well as sources of the knowledge we need to better move about the world, we would have indexes that were more indicative of the quality of our education. (45; italics in original)

Daiches explained that the pursuit of literary criticism included a quest "to find a formula which will define the *quiddity* of a literary form and goes on to the analysis of individual texts which demonstrates that any given example conforms to this definition"; and thus, "This is all very appealing. The human mind has a fondness for definitions



Student newspaper office, Eads Hall, Washington State University, c. 1930.

and categories, for contrasts and exclusions, for analytic demonstrations” (66; italics in the original). I would add that Daiches’s claim that New Criticism’s penchant for definitions and categories appeals to many teachers is *especially true in formal schooling driven by accountability mandates and testing*. New Criticism, then, at least in some ways, spoke to the appeal of objectivity and analysis, matching the “cult of efficiency” dominating public education (Callahan).

Further, Daiches admitted “that many who appreciate and have profited from the achievements of the new critics (and I consider myself one of those) nevertheless resent the assumption of some of their spokesmen that they alone are really critics” (65). Here, Daiches targeted the ultimate trap not only for literary criticism but also for teaching students a single authoritarian way to engage with texts. To invite students to consider many thoughtful approaches to literary analysis is much different than instilling in them—often without naming the perspective—New Criticism as *the correct* way to draw a single meaning from literature. Next, Daiches made a detailed case for both the value of New Criticism and the danger of reducing literary analysis and literature themselves to mere formula:

The richness and uniqueness of poetic statement, so rightly insisted on by the new critics, is far too often underestimated in their practice, for in their desire to concern themselves only with literary criteria they are liable to narrow their analysis so as to exclude all elements that are not exclusively related to those criteria. But the fact is that there is no such thing as a purely literary work of literature. A work of literary art is necessarily a mixed form. It produces its effect by being several things at once—not by mere complexity but by operating simultaneously on several different levels not only of meaning but of existence. (67)

This examination of New Criticism presented a complex consideration of literary criticism as a field in constant flux, rich with nuance and debate. But Daiches went further and addressed how a stance on literary analysis manifests itself in the classroom—also rife with problems:

To teach a student that criticism always and necessarily involves demonstration of internal consistency, or of paradox, or of ambivalent meanings, or

what have you, *may* be useful but is often fatal. If the student does not learn that such devices are means to achieve a communicative effect and that the reader remains dead to the work so long as that communicative effect remains unachieved, then he has learned only to be a pedant. . . . In [the New Critics’] demand that all works should be treated as though they were contemporary and anonymous they are in effect requiring the student of today to do without tools which they themselves are continually using, though often not consciously. (69; italics in original)

This warning echoed Ralph Waldo Emerson’s similar concern in “Self-Reliance”—“Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm”—and it speaks to our classrooms today when we have implemented New Criticism in a tacit and formulaic way that results in students identifying literary techniques *as a terminal goal of reading* without ever engaging with a work holistically and personally.

Ultimately, Daiches conceded “it would be unjust to judge the new criticism by its more ragged camp followers,” but his concerns are apt to be reflected in the exact ways in which we impose a narrow view of literary analysis on our students in the pursuit of efficiency and objectivity—instead of “a richer, not a narrower, aesthetic” endorsed by Daiches (71).

“A Richer, Not a Narrower, Aesthetic”: A Critical Alternative

Michael Santa Maria wrote a letter to *English Journal* in 1999, responding to an earlier piece on reader response and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*:

But good intentions do not make up for shoddy research. The writers especially go astray in their unfair condemnation of the “New Critics.” . . . How can you print such unsubstantiated nonsense? If these two writers were referring to the school of New Criticism founded by Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and other American writers of the early part of this century, then I do not believe a more incorrect assumption could have been possibly made. (10–11)

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This letter at the cusp of moving from one century to the next highlights two important points as we examine the narrative about New Criticism in *English Journal* over the

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past century and the role New Criticism still plays in our classrooms: (1) literary criticism remains a *vibrant debate*, not a fixed doctrine; and (2) the debate remains largely outside the classroom and exclusively among the adults.

As we move into the second century of *English Journal*, I think we should recapture some of the nuance and skepticism in Daiches's work from 1950 both by naming and confronting how we in-

vite our students to interact with text. To say to students "Follow this script" without naming the script as New Criticism is narrow and dishonest; to say to students "This is how a New Critic would unfold this poem, but a Feminist would offer these clarifications. What do you think is a powerful approach to this piece and why?" is quite a different and more thoughtful thing—a critical thing:

Teaching for critical literacy seeks to prepare students to critique and question the texts they encounter rather than accept and absorb them. This adds, unarguably, a political dimension. A central goal of this approach is to promote a disposition and the necessary skills for work for social justice. (Michell 42)

On one level, we owe our field of English language arts pedagogy the opportunity to reexamine the unspoken power of New Criticism as well as the reduced ways in which New Criticism has been implemented in our classes. We must consider the role reader response has played as the most frequent challenge to New Criticism in our classrooms—including the misunderstanding and misuse of Rosenblatt's perspective as well. But we must rise above the narrow tensions among critical perspectives.

Literary analysis, then, becomes about *agency*—the agency in the work/text itself and the agency of the reader reading and rereading the world (Freire). The call for critical literacy does not deny or silence the potential power of New

Criticism or reader response or any critical stance. Instead it calls for confronting efficiency and objectivity as questionable stances:

We can help students read the word and the world in deeper and more profound ways. We can help students investigate the ways in which they are manipulated. They can become critically literate consumers of the media. They can engage with and focus on current issues. We can help them problematize the world so they think about their role in it and what they can do to shape its future directions. (Michell 45)

The map and narrative revealed and preserved in the pages of *English Journal* offer us the opportunity to take the debate to the classroom *with* our students as a show of faith in the potential of the human mind and spirit. The critical classroom helps us avoid the traps of becoming mere bookworms, and even rise above *students and teachers thinking* to *students and teachers acting* on the world, writing and rewriting that world. 

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NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2012: April 19

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE's Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, April 19, 2012. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See <http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday> for details.

EJ 100 Years Ago

Stimulating Student Writers

One of the reasons for the effectiveness of the newspaper training is, of course, apparent to everyone. It is that the theme correction that goes on in the newspaper office is merciless and decisive. The young reporter cannot make the same mistake twice. He either learns and conforms, or he gets out. But other influences must be taken into account—the sense of loyalty to the paper, the satisfaction of being an effective part of a powerful institution, the atmosphere of work in the office, the daily contact with men who are straining every fiber to accomplish well their appointed task; above all, the sense that what one writes will be read by thousands of persons and will in some measure go to shape their thoughts and lives. These things are powerfully stimulating. If we could bring just a fraction of this stimulus to bear upon our students when they write, the problem of theme-correcting would be immensely simplified. (176)

Fred Newton Scott (University of Michigan). "A Hint from the Newspaper Office." *English Journal* 1.3 (1912): 175–76.