

Critical Theory Today

A user-friendly guide

Third edition

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5 New Criticism

New Criticism occupies an unusual position, both in this textbook and in the field of literary studies today. On the one hand, it's the only theory covered in this book that is no longer practiced by literary critics, so it can't really be called a contemporary theory. On the other hand, New Criticism, which dominated literary studies from the 1940s through the 1960s, has left a lasting imprint on the way we read and write about literature. Some of its most important concepts concerning the nature and importance of textual evidence – the use of concrete, specific examples from the text itself to validate our interpretations – have been incorporated into the way most literary critics today, regardless of their theoretical persuasion, support their readings of literature. In fact, if you're an English major, you probably take for granted the need for thorough textual support for your literary interpretations because this practice, which the New Critics introduced to America and called "close reading," has been a standard method of high school and college instruction in literary studies for the past several decades. So in this sense, New Criticism is still a real presence among us and probably will remain so for some time to come.

Few students today, however, are aware of New Criticism's contribution to literary studies or of the theoretical framework that underlies the classroom instruction it has fostered. For this reason, I think we should give New Criticism the same kind of attention we give to the other theories in this textbook. In addition, we need to understand New Criticism in order to understand those theories that have developed in reaction against it. As we'll see in subsequent chapters, reader-response criticism opposes New Criticism's definition of the literary text and method of interpreting it, and structuralism rejects New Criticism's focus on the individual literary work in isolation from other literature and from other cultural productions. In addition, deconstruction's theory of language and new historicism's view of objective evidence are directly opposed to New Critical assumptions about language and objectivity.

"The text itself"

To fully appreciate New Criticism's contribution to literary studies today, we need to remember the form of criticism it replaced: the biographical-historical criticism

that dominated literary studies in the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. At that time, it was common practice to interpret a literary text by studying the author's life and times to determine *authorial intention*, that is, the meaning the author intended the text to have. The author's letters, diaries, and essays were combed for evidence of authorial intention as were autobiographies, biographies, and history books. In its most extreme form, biographical-historical criticism seemed, to some, to examine the text's biographical-historical context instead of examining the text. As one of my former professors described the situation, students attending a lecture on Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas" (1805) could expect to hear a description of the poet's personal and intellectual life: his family, friends, enemies, lovers, habits, education, beliefs, and experiences. "Now you understand the meaning of 'Elegiac Stanzas,'" they would be told, without anyone in the room, including the lecturer, having opened the book to look at the poem itself. Or, in a similar manner, scholars viewed the literary text merely as an adjunct to history, as an illustration of the "spirit of the age" in which it was written, not as an art object worthy of study for its own sake. For New Critics, however, the poem itself was all that mattered.

"The *text itself*" became the battle cry of the New Critical effort to focus our attention on the literary work as the sole source of evidence for interpreting it. The life and times of the author and the spirit of the age in which he or she lived are certainly of interest to the literary historian, New Critics argued, but they do not provide the literary critic with information that can be used to analyze the text itself. In the first place, they pointed out, sure knowledge of the author's intended meaning is usually unavailable. We can't telephone William Shakespeare and ask him how he intended us to interpret Hamlet's hesitation in carrying out the instructions of his father's ghost, and Shakespeare left no written explanation of his intention. More important, even if Shakespeare had left a record of his intention, as some authors have, all we can know from that record is what he wanted to accomplish, not what he did accomplish. Sometimes a literary text doesn't live up to the author's intention. Sometimes it is even more meaningful, rich, and complex than the author realized. And sometimes the text's meaning is simply different from the meaning the author wanted it to have. Knowing an author's intention, therefore, tells us nothing about the text itself, which is why New Critics coined the term *intentional fallacy* to refer to the mistaken belief that the author's intention is the same as the text's meaning.

Just as we cannot look to the author's intention to find the meaning of a literary text, neither can we look to the reader's personal response to find it. Any given reader may or may not respond to what is actually provided by the text itself. Readers' feelings or opinions about a text may be produced by some personal association from past experience rather than by the text. I may, for example, respond to Hamlet's mother based solely on my feelings about my own mother and

nevertheless conclude that I have correctly interpreted the literary character. Such a conclusion would be an example of what New Critics called the *affective fallacy*. While the intentional fallacy confuses the text with its origins, the affective fallacy confuses the text with its affects, that is, with the emotions it produces. The affective fallacy leads to impressionistic responses (if a reader doesn't like a character, then that character must be evil) and relativism (the text means whatever any reader thinks it means). The final outcome of such a practice is chaos: we have no standards for interpreting or evaluating literature, which is therefore reduced to the status of the ink-blot on which psychiatric patients project their own meanings.

Although the author's intention or the reader's response is sometimes mentioned in New Critical readings of literary texts, neither one is the focus of analysis. For the only way we can know if a given author's intention or a given reader's interpretation actually represents the text's meaning is to carefully examine, or "closely read," all the evidence provided by the language of the text itself: its images, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, meter, point of view, setting, characterization, plot, and so forth, which, because they form, or shape, the literary work are called its *formal elements*. But before we discuss how this method of close reading operates, we need to understand just what New Critics meant by "the text itself" because their definition of the literary work is directly related to their beliefs concerning the proper way to interpret it.

For New Criticism, a literary work is a *timeless, autonomous* (self-sufficient) *verbal object*. Readers and readings may change, but the literary text stays the same. Its meaning is as objective as its physical existence on the page, for it is constructed of words placed in a specific relationship to one another – specific words placed in a specific order – and this one-of-a-kind relationship creates a complex of meaning that cannot be reproduced by any other combination of words. A New Critical reading of Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" (1966) can help us appreciate the poem by explaining how the poem's complex of meaning works, but it cannot replace that complex of meaning: only "Middle Passage" is "Middle Passage," and it will always be "Middle Passage." This is why New Criticism asserted that the meaning of a poem could not be explained simply by paraphrasing it, or translating it into everyday language, a practice New Critics referred to as the *heresy of paraphrase*. Change one line, one image, one word of the poem, they argued, and you will have a different poem.

Literary language and organic unity

The importance of the formal elements of a literary text is a product of the nature of *literary language*, which, for New Criticism, is very different from scientific language and from everyday language. Scientific language, and a good deal of everyday

language, depends on denotation, the one-to-one correspondence between words and the objects or ideas they represent. Scientific language doesn't draw attention to itself, doesn't try to be beautiful or emotionally evocative. Its job is to point not to itself but to the physical world beyond it, which it attempts to describe and explain. Literary language, in contrast, depends on connotation: on the implication, association, suggestion, and evocation of meanings and of shades of meaning. (For example, while the word *father* denotes *male parent*, it connotes *authority*, *protection*, and *responsibility*.) In addition, literary language is expressive: it communicates tone, attitude, and feeling. While everyday language is often connotative and expressive, too, in general it is not deliberately or systematically so, for its chief purpose is practical. Everyday language wants to get things done. Literary language, however, organizes linguistic resources into a special arrangement, a complex unity, to create an aesthetic experience, a world of its own.

Unlike scientific and everyday language, therefore, the form of literary language – the word choice and arrangement that create the aesthetic experience – is inseparable from its content, its meaning. Put more simply, *how* a literary text means is inseparable from *what* it means. For the form and meaning of a literary work, at least of a great literary work, develop together, like a complex living organism whose parts cannot be separated from the whole. And indeed, the work's *organic unity* – the working together of all the parts to make an inseparable whole – is the criterion by which New Critics judged the quality of a literary work. If a text has an organic unity, then all of its formal elements work together to establish its theme, or the meaning of the work as a whole. Through its organic unity, the text provides both the *complexity* that a literary work must have, if it is to adequately represent the complexity of human life, and the *order* that human beings, by nature, seek. For New Criticism, then, the explanation of literary meaning and the evaluation of literary greatness became one and the same act, for when New Critics explained a text's organic unity they were also establishing its claim to greatness. Let's take a closer look at each of the criteria of literary value embodied in organic unity: complexity and order.

For New Criticism, the complexity of a text is created by the multiple and often conflicting meanings woven through it. And these meanings are a product primarily of four kinds of linguistic devices: paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension. Briefly, *paradox* is a statement that seems self-contradictory but represents the actual way things are. For example, it is a biblical paradox that you must lose your life in order to gain it. On the surface, that phrase seems self-contradictory: how can you gain an object by losing it? However, the phrase means that by giving up one kind of life, the transitory life of the flesh, you gain another, more important kind of life: the eternal life of the soul. Similarly, a paradox of everyday experience can be seen in the old saying Joni Mitchell uses so effectively in her song "Big Yellow Taxi": "You don't know what you've got 'till it's gone." Not unlike the biblical reference

above, this old adage tells us that you have to lose something (physically) before you can find it (spiritually). Many of life's spiritual and psychological realities are paradoxical in nature, New Critics observed, and paradox is thus responsible for much of the complexity of human experience and of the literature that portrays it.

Irony, in its simple form, means a statement or event undermined by the context in which it occurs. The following description of a wealthy husband's sense of moral rectitude, from Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905), is an example of an ironic statement.

Once in the winter the rector would come to dine, and her husband would beg her to go over the list and see that no divorcées were included, except those who had showed signs of penitence by being remarried to the very wealthy. (57)

Part of the ironic implication of this passage is that the husband is a hypocrite: he condemns divorce only if it is not followed by the acquisition of equal or greater wealth, so what he really condemns, under the guise of moral principles, is financial decline. An example of an ironic event can be seen in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) when Pecola finally receives the blue eyes she has wished for so desperately. Her wish has been "fulfilled" only because she has lost touch with reality so completely that she believes her brown eyes are blue.

New Criticism, however, primarily valued irony in a broader sense of the term, to indicate a text's inclusion of varying perspectives on the same characters or events. We see this kind of irony, for example, when Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) offers us perspectives from which we may utterly condemn Willoughby for his treachery to Marianne; forgive him because his behavior resulted from a combination of love, financial desperation, and a weakness of character which he himself laments; sympathize with him for the severity of the punishment his behavior has brought upon him; and see the ways in which Marianne's willful foolishness contributed to her own heartbreak. Such a variety of possible viewpoints is considered a form of irony because the credibility of each viewpoint undermines to some extent the credibility of the others. The result is a complexity of meaning that mirrors the complexity of human experience and increases the text's believability. In contrast, had Willoughby been portrayed as purely and uncomplicatedly evil, Marianne would have been idealized as a completely innocent victim, and the text would have become vulnerable to the reader's skepticism, which would put the reader at an ironic distance from the text. Thus the text's own internal irony, or awareness of multiple viewpoints, protects it from the external irony of the reader's disbelief.

Ambiguity occurs when a word, image, or event generates two or more different meanings. For example, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), the image of the tree

produced by the scar tissue on Sethe's back implies, among other things, suffering (the "tree" resulted from a brutal whipping, which is emblematic of all the hardships experienced under slavery), endurance (trees can live for hundreds of years, and the scar tissue itself testifies to Sethe's remarkable ability to survive the most traumatic experiences), and renewal (like the trees that lose their leaves in the fall and are "reborn" every spring, Sethe is offered, at the novel's close, the chance to make a new life). In scientific or everyday language, ambiguity is usually considered a flaw because it's equated with a lack of clarity and precision. In literary language, however, ambiguity is considered a source of richness, depth, and complexity that adds to the text's value.

Finally, the complexity of a literary text is created by its *tension*, which, broadly defined, means the linking together of opposites. In its simplest form, tension is created by the integration of the abstract and the concrete, of general ideas embodied in specific images. For example, in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), the concrete image of Willy's tiny house, bathed in blue light and surrounded by enormous apartment buildings that emanate an angry orange glow, embodies the general idea of the underdog, the victim of forces larger and more numerous than itself. Similarly, the concrete image of Linda Loman singing Willy to sleep embodies the general idea of the devoted wife, the caretaker, the nurturer. Such *concrete universals* – or images and fictional characters that are meaningful on both the concrete level, where their meaning is literal and specific, and on the symbolic level, where they have universal significance – are considered a form of tension because they hold together the opposing realms of physical reality and symbolic reality in a way characteristic of literary language. In other words, the Loman home and the character of Linda Loman represent both themselves and something larger than themselves.

Tension is also created by the dynamic interplay among the text's opposing tendencies, that is, among its paradoxes, ironies, and ambiguities. For example, we might say that the action of *Death of a Salesman* is structured by the tension between reality and illusion: between the harsh reality of Willy Loman's life and the self-delusion into which he keeps trying to escape. Ideally, the text's opposing tendencies are held in equilibrium by working together to make a stable and coherent meaning. For example, the tension between harsh reality and self-delusion in *Death of a Salesman* is held in equilibrium by the following meaning: so great is Willy's desire to succeed as a salesman and a father that his only defense against the common man's inevitable failures in a dog-eat-dog world is self-delusion, but that self-delusion only increases his failure. Thus, the play shows us how harsh reality and self-delusion feed off each other until the only escape is death.

As noted earlier, the complexity of the text, to which all of these linguistic devices contribute, must be complemented by a sense of order if a literary work is to achieve greatness. Therefore, all of the multiple and conflicting meanings

produced by the text's paradoxes, ironies, ambiguities, and tensions must be resolved, or harmonized, by their shared contribution to the theme. The text's *theme*, or complete meaning, is not the same thing as its topic. Rather, the theme is what the text does with its topic. For example, adultery is the topic of both Kate Chopin's "The Storm" (1898) and Alberto Moravia's "The Chase" (1967), but the meaning of adultery – its moral and psychological implications – is quite different in each story. In Chopin's tale, a single, spontaneous act of adultery seems to improve the emotional health and marriages of the two participants. The theme of "The Storm," we might say, is that individual circumstances, not abstract rules, determine what is right and wrong, healthy and unhealthy. In Moravia's story, in contrast, the young wife's extramarital affair seems to both result from and contribute to the emotional distance between her husband and herself. The theme of "The Chase," it might be argued, is that adultery is a form of emotional distance, and, as such, it signals the end of emotional intimacy in a marriage. Thus, the theme is an interpretation of human experience, and if the text is a great one, the theme serves as a commentary on human values, human nature, or the human condition. In other words, great literary works have themes of universal human (moral and/or emotional) significance.¹ They tell us something important about what it means to be human. We may not like or agree with the theme a story offers, but we can still see what that theme is and, most important for New Criticism, we can judge whether or not that theme is established by the text's formal elements in a way that produces an organic unity.

Close reading, the scrupulous examination of the complex relationship between a text's formal elements and its theme, is how the text's organic unity was established by the New Critic. Because of New Criticism's belief that the literary text can be understood primarily by understanding its form (which is why you'll sometimes hear it referred to as a type of *formalism*), a clear understanding of the definitions of specific formal elements is important. In addition to the formal elements discussed above – the linguistic devices of paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension – we should also take a moment to briefly define a few of the most frequently used kinds of figurative language: images, symbols, metaphors, and similes.

Figurative language is language that has more than, or other than, a strictly literal meaning. For instance, "It's raining cats and dogs" is a figurative expression used to indicate that it's raining very heavily. If it were taken literally, then the phrase would mean, of course, that actual cats and dogs were falling from the sky. Broadly defined, an *image*, as illustrated by our use of the word earlier, consists of a word or words that refer to an object perceived by the senses or to sense perceptions themselves: colors, shapes, lighting, sounds, tastes, smells, textures, temperatures, and so on. More narrowly defined, and most common in the practice of analyzing literary texts, imagery is visual, consisting of descriptions of objects, characters, or settings as they are seen by the eye. Although images always have literal

meaning – a description of clouds means that the weather is cloudy – they can evoke an emotional atmosphere as well: for example, a description of clouds can be used to evoke sadness.

If an image occurs repeatedly in a text, it probably has symbolic significance. A *symbol* is an image that has both literal and figurative meaning, a concrete universal, such as the swamp in Ernest Hemingway's "Big, Two-Hearted River" (1925). The swamp is a literal swamp – it's wet, it contains fish and other forms of aquatic life, one needs boots and special equipment to fish in it – but it also "stands for," or "figures," something else: the emotional problems the protagonist does not feel quite ready to face. Public symbols are usually easy to spot. For example, spring is usually a symbol of rebirth or youth; autumn is usually a symbol of death or dying; a river is usually a symbol of life or of a journey. Thus, a symbol has properties similar to those of the abstract idea it stands for. For example, a river can symbolize life because both a river and life are fluid and forward moving; both have a source and an endpoint. In addition, a river literally nurtures life: some life forms live in it; others drink from it.

The context provided by the text also helps us figure out a symbol's meaning. To use the example of Hemingway's swamp again, in addition to the similarities between a swamp and emotional problems – both are difficult to deal with because both involve unknown pitfalls that may be dangerous and are certainly challenging – the protagonist manifests the same attitude toward the swamp that he manifests toward his emotional problems: he avoids them. And this similarity tips us off to the swamp's symbolic content. Sometimes, the context provided by the text is all we have to go on because some symbols are private, or meaningful only to the author, and therefore more difficult to figure out. We may suspect, for example, that the image of a purple felt hat has symbolic significance in a story because it recurs frequently or plays a role that seems to reverberate with some abstract quality such as love or loneliness or strength, but we'll have to figure out what that symbolic significance is by studying how the hat operates within the overall meaning of the text. Of course, how something operates within the overall meaning of the text was always the bottom line for New Criticism, so it does not matter whether or not our analysis of the text's private symbolism matches the author's intention. What matters is that our analysis of the text's private symbolism, like our analysis of all its formal elements, supports what we claim is the text's theme.

In contrast with the double dimension of the symbol – its inclusion of both literal and figurative meaning – a *metaphor* has only figurative meaning. A metaphor is a comparison of two dissimilar objects in which the properties of one are ascribed to the other. For example, the phrase "my brother is a gem" is a metaphor. Obviously, it has no literal meaning. If it did, it would mean that my mother gave birth to a crystalline stone, for which feat she'd be on the cover of every tabloid in

the nation. The figurative meaning of the phrase, which is the only meaning it has, is that my brother shares certain properties with a gem: for example, he is of great worth. Thus, "he's a gem" is generally used to mean "he's a great guy." To get from metaphor to *simile* requires one small step: add *like* or *as*. "My brother is like a gem" or "my brother is as valuable as a gem" are similes that make the same comparison as the metaphor from which I derived them, though one might argue that the simile is softer because the connection between the idea of "brother" and the idea of "gem" is less direct or less forceful.

I think it's time we put these New Critical tools to work in order to see the New Critical method in action. So let's do a close reading of Lucille Clifton's "There Is a Girl Inside" (1977).

A New Critical reading of "There Is a Girl Inside"

There Is a Girl Inside

there is a girl inside.
 she is randy as a wolf.
 she will not walk away
 and leave these bones
 to an old woman.

she is a green tree
 in a forest of kindling.
 she is a green girl
 in a used poet.

she has waited
 patient as a nun
 for the second coming,
 when she can break through gray hairs
 into blossom

and her lovers will harvest
 honey and thyme
 and the woods will be wild
 with the damn wonder of it.

The poem's title, "There Is a Girl Inside," which also serves as the opening line, and the final two lines of the first stanza, which refer to "these bones" of an "old woman," suggest immediately that the speaker is an old woman who still feels young and vital inside. Is this initial observation supported by any additional textual evidence? Well, there's the fact that the speaker refers to the "girl inside" in the

might find psychological elements integral to characterization or plot in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1931) or Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843). In such cases, New Critics addressed these elements, but they did so for the purpose of examining how such elements operate to establish the text's theme (or to undermine it, if the text is flawed). In other words, New Critics didn't ignore the obvious psychological, sociological, or philosophical dimensions of the text; they aestheticized them. That is, they treated psychological, sociological, and philosophical content the same way they treated the text's formal elements: to learn what these elements contribute to the aesthetic experience created by the work's organic unity. In this way, New Critics claimed, their interpretation stayed within the context created by the text itself.

Because New Critics believed their interpretations were based solely on the context created by the text and the language provided by the text, they called their critical practice *intrinsic criticism*, to denote that New Criticism stayed within the confines of the text itself. In contrast, forms of criticism that employ psychological, sociological, or philosophical frameworks – in other words, all criticism other than their own – they called *extrinsic criticism* because it goes outside the literary text for the tools needed to interpret it. New Critics also called their approach *objective criticism* because their focus on each text's own formal elements ensured, they claimed, that each text – each object being interpreted – would itself dictate how it would be interpreted.

The single best interpretation

Given that the text was thus seen as an independent entity with a stable meaning of its own, New Critics believed that a single best, or most accurate, interpretation of each text could be discovered that best represents the text itself: that best explains what the text means and *how* the text produces that meaning, in other words, that best explains its organic unity. This is why, during New Criticism's heyday, essays interpreting a literary text frequently began with a survey of other critics' interpretations of the same text in order to show that everyone else's reading fell short – that important scenes or images were unaccounted for, that tensions structuring the text were not resolved – often because a proper understanding of the text's theme was lacking. In other words, in order to establish that yours was the best reading of a literary work, you would have to begin by establishing that all former readings were in some way inadequate.

In light of the scrupulous attention paid to textual details by the New Critics, it is understandable that their method worked best on short poems and stories because the shorter the text, the more of its formal elements could be analyzed. When longer works were examined, such as long poems, novels, and plays, New Critical readings usually confined themselves to the analysis of some aspect (or

aspects) of the work, for example, its imagery (or perhaps just one kind of imagery, such as nature imagery), the role of the narrator or of the minor characters, the function of time in the work, the pattern of light and dark created by settings, or some other formal element. Of course, whatever formal element was analyzed, it had to be shown to play an important role in the text's advancement of its theme and thus contribute to the unity of the work as a whole.

Through your own familiarity or unfamiliarity with the New Critical principles discussed in this chapter, you can probably form some idea of New Criticism's lasting contribution to literary studies. Some of its principles and terminology seem to have fallen by the wayside. For example, few literary critics today assert that a literary text is independent of the history and culture that produced it or that it has a single, objective meaning. And almost no one uses the word *tension* to refer to the symbol's integration of concrete images and abstract ideas. Nevertheless, New Criticism's success in focusing our attention on the formal elements of the text and on their relationship to the meaning of the text is evident in the way we study literature today, regardless of our theoretical perspective. For whatever theoretical framework we use to interpret a text, we always support our interpretation with concrete evidence from the text that usually includes attention to formal elements, and, with the notable exception of some deconstructive and reader-response interpretations, we usually try to produce an interpretation that conveys some sense of the text as a unified whole.

It's rather ironic, then, that New Criticism's gift to critical theory – its focus on the text itself – was responsible for its downfall. New Criticism was eclipsed in the late 1960s by the growing interest, among almost all other schools of critical theory, in the ideological content of literary texts and the ways in which that content both reflects and influences society, an interest that could not be served by the New Critical insistence on analyzing the text as an isolated aesthetic object with a single meaning.

The question New Critics asked about literary texts

Given New Criticism's focus on the single meaning of the text and its single method of establishing that meaning, it should not be surprising that our list of questions New Critics asked about literary texts should consist of only one complex question:

- 1 What single interpretation of the text best establishes its organic unity? In other words, how do the text's formal elements, and the multiple meanings those elements produce, all work together to support the theme, or overall meaning, of the work? Remember, a great work will have a theme of universal human significance. (If the text is too long to account for all of its formal elements,

apply this question to some aspect or aspects of its form, such as imagery, point of view, setting, or the like.)

Regardless of the literary text at hand, this is the question we ask in order to produce a New Critical interpretation. It is interesting to note that, despite their belief in the text's single, objective meaning, New Critics rarely agreed about what that meaning was or how the text worked to produce it. Instead, different interpretations of the same texts abounded. As in every field, even expert New Critical practitioners disagreed about the meaning of specific works. Our goal is to use New Criticism to help enrich our reading of literary texts, to help us see and appreciate in new ways the complex operations of their formal elements and how those elements function to create meaning.

The following interpretation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is offered as an example of what a New Critical reading might yield. I discovered what I believe is the novel's topic – human longing – by analyzing the text's imagery, the beauty and emotional force of which make it the most memorable and revealing dimension of the novel. Then I examined other formal elements in the text – specifically, characterization, setting, and elements of style – to determine what I claim is the novel's theme: that unfulfilled longing is an inescapable part of the human condition. As a practitioner of New Criticism, I was interested in the historical time and place described in the novel only as they manifest a theme that transcends historical time and place, a theme that has universal human significance.

The “deathless song” of longing: a New Critical reading of *The Great Gatsby*

Few readers of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) will fail to notice the breathtaking beauty of its imagery. Indeed, the haunting, wistful quality of the novel's images evokes the melancholy lyricism of the author's favorite poet, John Keats. Yet there has been little analysis of how the imagery in Fitzgerald's powerfully poetic novel structures the meaning of the text as a whole.

It might be argued that this oversight has resulted from the critical focus on *The Great Gatsby* as the chronicle of the Jazz Age – as a social commentary on a specific period in America's past – which has diverted attention onto historical issues and away from the text's formal elements. Most critics agree that Fitzgerald's novel offers a scathing critique of American values in the 1920s, the corruption of which is represented by Wolfsheim's exploitativeness, Daisy's duplicity, Tom's treachery, Jordan's dishonesty, Myrtle's vulgarity, and the shallowness of an American populace – embodied in Gatsby's parasitical party guests – whose moral fiber had declined with each passing year. This is a world run by men like Tom Buchanan and Meyer Wolfsheim, and despite their positions on opposite sides of the law, both characters