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Final Exam Essay:

Conservative Ethical Literary Criticism

In order to describe my personal philosophy of literary criticism, I need to explain what it is not. Many critical theories are based on worldviews that I do not share. While reading Marxist criticism, for example, may be interesting, I would not be likely to incorporate Marxist philosophy into my own critical reading of literary texts. I am a white male heterosexual American of European heritage. It is an undeniable historical reality that women, African-Americans, and other groups have been oppressed by people who belong to some or all of the groups to which I belong. Perhaps I have lived a sheltered life, but I find it difficult to understand the experiences of these groups, much less critically evaluate literature through their eyes. No matter how much I might want to understand what it is like, for example, to be black—I never will. I see value in literary criticism based on these worldviews, whether or not I understand or agree with them.

I do not believe that it is possible to psychoanalyze fictional characters, therefore I find Psychoanalytical Criticism to be ineffective. I find Structuralism to be a useful “tool on my belt” that I will certainly incorporate into my personal critical approach, but not to the exclusion of other techniques of criticism.

I have ambivalent feelings about New Criticism. There is a phenomenon associated with creative writing that I have personally experienced as a writer, and that I have heard expressed

by other writers, which defies rational explanation. Fictional characters sometimes “take on a life of their own” independent of the author. These characters are the product of the imagination of the author, but do not necessarily reflect characteristics of the author, the author’s life experiences, or anyone the author knows. Sometimes, it is better to evaluate literary works as an alternate reality, independent of the author or the author’s intentions. After I read and analyzed *Ethan Frome*, I wished I had not known what I knew about Edith Wharton and her life. I found that such knowledge distracted me more than it helped me.

On the other hand, interpretations of literature or other creative works sometimes infuse meanings, particularly of symbols, that the creator of the work *never* intended. A good example is the folk song “Puff the Magic Dragon,” which has been interpreted to contain symbols of marijuana use. In this interpretation, “puff the magic dragon” refers to smoking a bong or hash pipe which “lives by the sea” (“C” for cannabis); “little Jackie paper” representing “rolling papers,” etc. Peter Yarrow, who wrote the song, vehemently denies this interpretation, insisting that the song is really just about a dragon. I found three YouTube videos, one rather silly one that promotes the drug interpretation called [“Up Puff Puffs.”](#) and two where Yarrow denies the interpretation: [“Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary: Puff the Magic Dragon.”](#) and [“Puff the Magic Dragon Live”](#) (active hyperlinks).

I am, therefore, unable to totally embrace *or* reject New Criticism. A reasonable compromise, for me, is to consider information that the author personally said or wrote about a specific work, but to try to avoid speculation by myself or others about the author’s intentions.

I am an evangelical Christian, who interprets symbols in literature through *my* interpretation of the Bible, which is unique and not shared by all Christians. A good example comes from *Ethan Frome*. Just as every Christian has his or her mental image of *heaven*, each of

us has our own image of *hell*. My image is not of a hot place, but a *cold* place—a place separated from God, which is dark, lonely, and empty—devoid of all hope. Just as “hot as hell” is a common figure of speech, “cold as hell” is almost as common. The images of winter, snow, darkness and cold in *Ethan Frome* represent a figurative *hell* to me—a life without hope. In *Ethan Frome*, these images of winter are inextricably connected to the hopelessness associated with the three principal characters.

However, my interpretation of the winter symbols as “hell” in *Ethan Frome* is not a universal interpretation, even for Christians. I could not, then, call it a Christian reading of the novel—it is *my* “reader response.”

I do not believe that a Christian literary criticism method is even possible, since Christian ideology is so broad and has so many divergent viewpoints. For example, the “Harry Potter” novels by J. K. Rowling have generated much attention from the Christian community—both positive and negative. Literary criticism from Christian writers has also been published about the novels. Richard Abanes claims that the novels “contain spiritually dangerous material that could ultimately lead youth down the road to occultism” (6). Another Christian writer, John Killinger, states that the novels “are in fact narratives of robust faith and morality, entirely worthy of children’s reading . . .” (11). Both writers represent a Christian worldview, and yet they espouse opposite viewpoints. Furthermore, literary criticism based on Christian ideology would not be effective, because it would generally only be of interest to Christian readers, and many people in secular academia would never take it seriously.

I would not want my literary criticism efforts to be disregarded simply because of an association with Christianity; however, Christianity is my worldview—it is who I am. I can, however, speak from a position of conservative ethics that is the result of my Christian beliefs

without mentioning religion at all. Stealing, for example, is generally considered unethical behavior by people of many ideologies—including atheists and agnostics. My system of literary criticism, which I will call “Conservative Ethical Literary Criticism,” will judge the *behavior* of fictional characters in terms of conservative ethics. Some of the actions I consider unethical include breaking the law, breaking a promise, lying or other dishonesty, and having an agenda that serves self-interest at the expense of others. Engaging in unethical behavior may result in financial gain or fulfilling temporal wants and needs, but it will never result in happiness.

I will now apply this system of criticism to Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Nick, the first-person narrator of the novel, is from the midwest, and is unaccustomed to the behavior that he discovers in New York and Long Island. The fact that he is not guilty of the unethical behavior that he observes, at least not at first, makes him an objective chronicler of the events that he witnesses. Nick has no ulterior agenda, and is by far the most honest character in the novel. However, Nick’s ethical code is eventually corrupted when he helps to facilitate Gatsby and Daisy’s illicit affair.

For someone who is married, having sex with someone other than one’s spouse is unethical. Marriage is a legal contract, but it is also a promise to be faithful. For someone who is not married, having sex with someone who is married to someone else is unethical. Nothing good has ever come from extra-marital affairs, and the characters of this novel are good examples. Both Tom and Daisy have affairs with other people. Tom’s affair with Myrtle is an act of total selfishness on his part. He uses Myrtle for his own purposes, with no regard whatsoever for her, which eventually ends in her tragic death.

Jordan is portrayed in the novel as a compulsive liar, who seems unaffected by witnessing Myrtle’s violent death and who tells Nick that it is still early and she still wants to go

to dinner as if nothing happened. Gatsby's party guests use him without regard for their host, evidenced by their absence at his funeral. Gatsby, however, uses them as well—as props in his display of opulence intended to impress Daisy.

Jay Gatsby is the most unethical character in the novel. He manipulates everyone he encounters to get what he wants. His obsession for Daisy drives him to criminal behavior to acquire wealth and power, in order to win her affection. He befriends Nick to use Nick's family connection to Daisy to get closer to her. Gatsby does not care that Daisy is married and has a child. He has no regard for anyone except himself, and what he wants. When George Wilson kills Gatsby, I feel no pity for Gatsby whatsoever.

The tragedy that befalls all of the characters in the novel is the result of their own selfish and unethical behavior. There is a direct correlation between their behavior and the end result.

*The Great Gatsby* is a classic example of the cost of selfishness.

## Works Cited

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