

Literary Criticism – Day 1: Bradley & the “old school”



All of your work for this week (Literary Criticism) is to be kept in a separate journal. These journals will be checked. Start each day’s logs on a separate page – look over them before you come to class – **be sure to have the previous day’s questions (group, solo, questions for tomorrow (today), answered before you come to class.**

Format for your journals: Day on top of journal. **Heading 1: Questions for Today.** (today, Day 1, is the **only** day without these) Skip a few lines. **Heading 2: Group Work.** Skip a few lines. **Heading 3: Solo Work.** Skip a few lines. **Heading 4: Free Thoughts.** Skip a few lines. Finally write any free thoughts that you have about what that day’s topic of Literary Criticism (these are very important and should get longer and more thoughtful each day).

For each day: Do (or finish) All the Work on the handout (group, solo, anything else) before you do the next day’s reading!

If your time is short (shortened periods) be sure to do (or finish) the items listed as group work, before going on to individual work.

Group Work for today (to be answered in each person’s journal – but discussed as a group)

Read the definition of literary criticism in the text box to the left.

1. Why “Old School”? In one of her wonderful talks to instructors about how we teach Shakespeare, the incredible Peggy O’Brien¹ begins by asking the audience ten questions about a Shakespeare play. They are reasonable questions – they even sound familiar (and may have been asked in our very classrooms) - but before we (an audience of teachers) are given a chance to answer them – she points out that these questions were taken from a Literature Textbook created in middle of the 19th century – and yet they sound strangely familiar to teachers today. Much of the substance of those questions are drawn from critics like Bradley and from ideas like those found in the “Tragic Flaw.” What can you infer about O’Brien’s point? Why “Old School” – and before you even go any further, do you see a problem with how Shakespeare (especially criticism of his works) is still being taught – be brief but thoughtful.

literary criticism the reasoned consideration of literary works and issues. It applies, as a term, to any argumentation about literature, whether or not specific works are analyzed. Plato's cautions against the risky consequences of poetic inspiration in general in his *Republic* are thus often taken as the earliest important example of literary criticism. More strictly construed, the term covers only what has been called "practical criticism," the interpretation of meaning and the judgment of quality. Criticism in this narrow sense can be distinguished not only from aesthetics (the philosophy of artistic value) but also from other matters that may concern the student of literature: biographical questions, bibliography, historical knowledge, sources and influences, and problems of method. Thus, especially in academic studies, "criticism" is often considered to be separate from "scholarship." In practice, however, this distinction often proves artificial, and even the most single-minded concentration on a text may be informed by outside knowledge, while many notable works of criticism combine discussion of texts with broad arguments about the nature of literature and the principles of assessing it ("literary criticism" Britannica Online).

2. How does reading Literary Criticism differ from the work we usually do in class? For instance, how do you think it differs from our class (or small group) readings of a Shakespeare play (complete with class discussion) -- be as specific as you can be here. Notice what the definition says about specific works. How specifically can these be excluded from a discussion about literature without that discussion becoming vague and general? Thinking question: what would be substituted for a specific work?

Now read the definition of hamartia that appears on the next page, and then answer the following questions. You will also need your copies of McDonald's article.

3. metaquestion: First, how does such a thing as this definition (and the term’s “age”) fit in with your answer to the last part of question 1 (think!).

4. Consider this: What evidence supports the idea that Macbeth’s tragic flaw is ambition? What evidence refutes it? If you don’t have your *Macbeth* books, use your group’s collective memory.

5. Does your group believe the witches are an internal or external force (see the A.C. Bradley article 198-199). Explain your reasoning with 2 examples from the article and/or *Macbeth*. Now how does this effect the idea of Macbeth’s tragic flaw? Be very specific in answering this. You may wish to consult the background H.O. on tragedy that appeared on the back of the overview handout.

6. What does McDonald mean when he states that the idea of the “tragic flaw” is an “intellectual bypass?” Can you make a connection with Mr. Scotese’s dislike of “symbols” and the idea of an intellectual bypass? Be specific. If you ask someone who has an interesting story, “What happened?” and they reply by saying – “Oh, the same old thing.” Do you feel cheated? Why or why not, and what does that have to do with intellectual shortcuts?

¹ primary author of “Shakespeare Set Free” – the book that changed how Shakespeare is being taught in high school [by getting up and acting it out instead of sitting and listening to a tape.

7. Look at page 9, paragraph 2 (it begins with “Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet...”). Who speaks differently in *Twelfth Night* (or at what times)? According to McDonald what are the implication(s) about that (those) character(s)? Be specific. Give one example of their “different speech” and a specific implication.
8. Take another look at the first page of “The Flaw in the Flaw” –McDonald says that A.C. Bradley’s reliance on strict definitions of terms like *tragedy* allow us to “apprehend a complex representation of a mysterious human experience and, by naming it, to master that mystery.” McDonald also says that this precise labeling is part of “the Victorian notions that ‘God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world’” –How does McDonald’s ultimate rejection of these precepts fit in with Grendel’s view of the universe? After you answer that (and with apologies to Veronica Carr), how does A.C. Bradley and all “old school” literary critics function as *shapers*? Can anyone in your group recall the question about teachers and shapers (see if you can find it) – how and why do we need, desire literary criticism that goes beyond a simple reading of a story or play? Later, you will be reading a modern book, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* that directly addresses the modern author’s inability to “make all right with the world” in their work.
9. In another essay, Bradley says that if *Henry IV Part 2* (a History play by Shakespeare) were a comedy (like, in his own words: *Twelfth Night*) it would not end with Falstaff’s (a character much loved by the audience) disgrace? Does that kind of “pigeon-holing” (labeling) as with “tragic flaw” of tragedies, comedies, and histories contribute or take away from our understanding of the play – remember Fredrigo’s Falcon and the “Happy Ending” stories (really – take a moment to recall that ending – did Mona have a “happy ending?)) – and what about *Twelfth Night* – does it end happily? For all (the movie helps here – doesn’t it)? Explain your answer in the context of McDonald’s article.

Solo Work (if you have any time go over – but do not attempt to answer these questions with your group making sure you understand the question)

1. How does reading Literary Criticism (a *secondary reading*) differ from your reading of a *primary work* (ie *Macbeth*)?
2. Perhaps the most famous of Shakespeare’s Tragedies is *Hamlet*, with good ole Hamlet being perhaps the most famous of all tragic heroes (in the A.C. Bradley sense of the term). A modern playwright, Tom Stoppard, wrote a play that examines *Hamlet* from a modern perspective. In Stoppard’s play two minor characters (from *Hamlet*), Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are caught in an infinite loop of “acting out their parts” without any chance of escaping their fate – how do you think this (his play) is at least partially a commentary on the views of older scholars like Bradley and their “pigeon-holing” perspectives.
3. I call A.C. Bradley’s kind of criticism – “Old School” – it was the type of literary criticism that existed, pretty much from Plato’s time (Ancient Greece) till about 100 years ago. What events in the 20th Century (1900-2000) may have made this type of “assured” criticism (feeling like we can know exactly *what and why* an author meant) obsolete? Be as specific as you can (ask your group the next day what they came up with).
4. How did your reading of Bradley’s article affect your reading of *Macbeth*? Be specific but brief.
5. How does your reading of McDonald affect your reading of Bradley?
6. Do you have any candidates for tragically flawed heroes in *Twelfth Night* (though this is a comedy and not a tragedy) – explain with specifics.

hamartia (from Greek *hamartanein*, "to err"), also called Tragic Flaw, inherent defect or shortcoming in the hero of a tragedy, who is in other respects a superior being favoured by fortune.

Aristotle introduced the term casually in the *Poetics* in describing the tragic hero as a man of noble rank and nature whose misfortune is not brought about by villainy but by some "error of judgment" (hamartia). This imperfection later came to be interpreted as a moral flaw, such as Othello's jealousy or Hamlet's irresolution, although most great tragedies defy such a simple interpretation. Most importantly, the hero's suffering and its far-reaching reverberations are far out of proportion to his flaw. An element of cosmic collusion among the hero's flaw, chance, necessity, and other external forces is essential to bring about the tragic catastrophe.

In Greek tragedy the nature of the hero's flaw is even more elusive. Often the tragic deeds are committed unwittingly, as when Oedipus unknowingly kills his father and marries his own mother. If the deeds are committed knowingly, they are not committed by choice: Orestes is under obligation to Apollo to avenge his father's murder by killing his mother. Also, an apparent weakness is often only an excess of virtue, such as an extreme probity or zeal for perfection. It has been suggested in such cases, since the tragic hero is never passive but struggles to resolve his tragic difficulty with an obsessive dedication, that he is guilty of hubris—*i.e.*, presumption of being godlike and attempting to overstep his human limitations ("tragic flaw" hamartia).

Questions for tomorrow (to be answered by the time you come to class, and put in your journals, as the Day 2, *Questions for Today*)

1. How does the historical background of what you’ve read about women in England fit in with how you perceive women are treated today? Be brief, yet specific as possible, making at least 2 specific comparisons.
2. Consider all of the female characters that you’ve read so far this year. Write down as many as you can. Do they have anything in common? Do they differ? Which character would you define as being the most *feminist*? Finally, how do these literary figures fit in with the specifics of what you’ve read about how women were historically treated during the time these characters were created? Explain your answers in a sentence or two.