*appendix C*

# Critical Approaches Important to the Study of Literature

A number of critical theories or approaches for understanding and interpreting literature are available to critics and students alike. Many of these have been developed during the twentieth century to create a discipline of literary studies comparable with disciplines in the natural and social sciences. Literary critics have often borrowed liberally from other disciplines (e.g., history, psychology, anthropology) but have primarily aimed at developing literature as a course of study in its own right.

At the heart of the various critical approaches have been many fundamental questions: What is literature? What does it do? Is its concern only to tell stories, or is it to express emotions? Is it private? Public? How does it get its ideas across? What more does it do than express ideas? How valuable was literature in the past and how valuable is it now? What can it contribute to intellectual, artistic, and social history? To what degree is literature an art, as opposed to an instrument for imparting knowledge? How is literature used, and how and why is it misused? What theoretical and technical expertise may be invoked to enhance literary studies?

Questions such as these indicate that criticism is concerned not only with reading and interpreting stories, poems, and plays, but also with establishing theoretical understanding. Because of such extensive aims, you will understand that a full explanation and illustration of the approaches would fill the pages of a long book. The following descriptions are therefore intended as no more than brief introductions. Bear in mind that in the hands of skilled critics, the approaches are so subtle, sophisticated, and complex that they are not only critical stances but also philosophies.

Although the various approaches provide widely divergent ways to study literature and literary problems, they reflect major tendencies rather than absolute straitjacketing. Not every approach is appropriate for every work, nor are the approaches always mutually exclusive. Even the most devoted practitioners of the methods do not pursue them rigidly. In addition, some of the approaches are more "user-friendly" for certain types of discovery than others. To a degree at least, most critics therefore utilize methods that technically belong to one or more of the other approaches. A critic stressing the topical/historical approach, for example, might introduce the close study of a work that is associated with the method of the New Criticism. Similarly, a psychoanalytical critic might include details about archetypes. In short, a great deal of criticism is *pragmatic* or *eclectic* rather than rigid.

The approaches to be considered here are these: *moral/intellectual; topical/historical; New Critical/formalist; structuralist; feminist; economic determinist/Marxist; psychological/psychoanalytic; archetypal/symbolic/mythic; Deconstructionist;* and *Reader-Response.*

Following each description is a brief paragraph showing how Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown" might be considered in the light of the particular approach. The paragraph following the discussion of structuralism, for example, shows how the structuralist approach can be applied to Goodman Brown and his story.

## MORAL/INTELLECTUAL

The moral/intellectual approach is concerned with content and values (see Chapter 7). The approach is as old as literature itself, for literature is a traditional mode of imparting morality, philosophy, and religion. The concern in moral/intellectual criticism is not only to discover meaning but also to determine whether works of literature are both *true* and *significant.*

To study literature from the moral/intellectual perspective is therefore to determine whether an individual work conveys a lesson or a message, and whether it can help readers lead better lives and improve their understanding of the world: What ideas does the work contain? How strongly does the work bring forth its ideas? What application do the ideas have to the work's characters and situations? How may they be evaluated intellectually? Morally? A discussion based on such questions does not necessarily require a position of command or exhortation. Ideally, moral/intellectual criticism should differ from sermonizing to the degree that readers should always be left with their own decisions about whether they wish to assimilate the content of a work and about whether this content is personally or morally acceptable.

Sophisticated critics have sometimes demeaned the moral/intellectual approach on the grounds that "message hunting" reduces a work's artistic value by treating it like a sermon or political speech; but the approach will be valuable as long as readers expect literature to be applicable to their own lives.

### Example

"Young Goodman Brown" raises the issue of how an institution designed for human elevation, such as the religious system of colonial Salem, can be so ruinous. Does the failure result from the system itself or from the people who misunderstand it? Is what is true of religion as practiced by Brown also true of social and political institutions? Should any religious or political philosophy be given greater credence than goodwill and mutual trust? One of the major virtues of "Young Goodman Brown" is that it provokes questions like these but at the same time provides a number of satisfying answers. A particularly important one is that religious and moral beliefs should not be used to justify the condemnation of others. Another important answer is that attacks made from the refuge of a religion or group, such as Brown's puritanical judgment, is dangerous because it enables the judge to condemn without thought and without personal responsibility.

## TOPICAL/HISTORICAL

This traditional approach stresses the relationship of literature to its historical period, and for this reason it has had a long life. Although much literature may be applicable to many places and times, much of it also directly reflects the intellectual and social worlds of the authors. When was the work written? What were the circumstances that produced it? What major issues does it deal with? How does it fit into the author's career? Keats's poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," for example, is his excited response to his reading of one of the major literary works of Western civilization. Hardy's "Channel Firing" is an acerbic response to continued armament and preparation for war during the twentieth century.

The topical/historical approach investigates relationships of this sort, including the elucidation of words and concepts that today's readers may not immediately understand. Obviously, the approach requires the assistance of footnotes, dictionaries, histories, and handbooks.

A common criticism of the topical/historical approach is that in the extreme it deals with background knowledge rather than with literature itself. It is possible, for example, for a topical/historical critic to describe a writer's life, the period of the writer's work, and the social and intellectual ideas of the time—all without ever considering the meaning, importance, and value of the work itself.

### Example

"Young Goodman Brown" is an allegorical story by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864), the New England writer who probed deeply into the relationships between religion and guilt. His ancestors had been involved in religious persecutions, including the Salem witch trials, and he, living 150 years afterward, wanted to probe the weaknesses and uncertainties of the sin-dominated religion of the earlier period. Not surprisingly, therefore, "Young Goodman Brown" takes place in Puritan, colonial Salem. Although the immediate concerns of the story belong to a vanished age, Hawthorne's treatment is still valuable because it is still timely.

## NEW CRITICAL/FORMALIST

The New Criticism began in the 1930s and 1940s and has since been a dominant force in twentieth-century literary studies. To the degree that New Criticism focuses upon literary texts as formal works of art, it departs from the topical/historical approach. The objection raised by the New Critics is that as topical/historical critics consider literary history, they avoid close contact with actual texts.

The inspiration for the formalist or New Critical approach was the French practice of *explication de texte*, a method that emphasizes detailed examination and explanation. The New Criticism is therefore at its most brilliant in the analysis of smaller units such as entire poems and short passages. The New Criticism also utilizes a number of techniques for the analysis of larger structures, many of which form the basis for the chapters in this book. Discussions of "point of view," "tone," "plot," "character," and "structure," for example, are ways of looking at literature derived from the New Criticism.

The aim of the formalist study of literature is to provide readers not only with the means of explaining the content of works ("What, specifically, does this say?"), but also with the critical tools needed for evaluating the artistic quality of individual works and writers ("How well is it said?"). A major aspect of New Critical thought is that content and form—including all ideas, ambiguities, subtleties, and even apparent contradictions—were originally within the conscious or subconscious control of the author. There are no accidents. It does not necessarily follow, however, that today's critic is able to define the author's intentions exactly, for such intentions require knowledge of biographical details that are irretrievably lost. Each literary work therefore takes on its own existence and identity, and the critic's work is to discover a reading or readings that explain the facts of the text. Note that the New Critic does not claim infallible interpretations and does not exclude the validity of multiple readings of identical works.

Dissenters from the New Criticism have noted a tendency by New Critics to ignore relevant knowledge that history and biography may bring to lit-

erary studies. In addition, the approach has been subject to the charge that stressing the examination of texts alone fails to deal with the value and appreciation of literature.

### Example

A major aspect of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" is that the details are so vague and dreamlike that many readers are uncertain about what is happening. The action is a nighttime walk by the protagonist, Young Goodman Brown, into a deep forest where he encounters a mysterious Satanic ritual that leaves him bitter and misanthropic. This much seems clear, but the precise nature of Brown's experience is not clear, nor is the identity of the stranger (father, village elder, devil) who accompanies Brown as he begins his walk. At the story's end Hawthorne's narrator states that the whole episode may have been no more than a dream or nightmare. Yet when morning comes, Brown walks back into town as though returning from an overnight trip, and he recoils in horror from his fellow villagers, including his wife Faith (paragraph 70). Could his attitude result from nothing more than a nightmare?

Even at the story's end these uncertainties remain. For this reason one may conclude that Hawthorne deliberately creates the uncertainties to reveal how persons like Brown build defensive walls of judgment around themselves. The story thus implies that the real source of Brown's anger is as vague as his nocturnal walk, but he doesn't understand it in this way. Because Brown's vision and judgment are absolute, he rejects everyone around him, even if the cost is a life of bitter suspicion and spiritual isolation.

## STRUCTURALIST

The principle of *structuralism* stems from the attempt to find relationships and connections among elements that appear to be separate and discrete. Just as physical science reveals unifying universal principles of matter such as gravity and the forces of electromagnetism (and is constantly searching for a "unified field theory"), structuralism attempts to discover the forms unifying all literatures. Thus a structural description of Maupassant's "The Necklace" would stress that the main character, Mathilde, is an *active* protagonist who undergoes a *test* (or series of tests) and emerges with a victory, though not the kind she had originally hoped for. The same might be said of Phoenix in Welty's "A Worn Path." If this same kind of structural view is applied to Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," the protagonist would emerge in defeat. Generally, the structural approach applies such patterns to other works of literature to determine that some protagonists are active or submissive, that they pass or fail their tests, or that they succeed or fail at other encounters. The key is that many apparently unrelated works reveal many common patterns or contain similar structures with important variations.

The structural approach has become important because it enables critics to discuss works from widely separate cultures and historical periods. In this respect, critics have followed the leads of modern anthropologists, most notably Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908). Along such lines, critics have undertaken the serious examination of folk tales and fairy tales. Some of the groundbreaking structuralist criticism, for example, was devoted to the structural principles underlying Russian folk tales. The method also bridges popular and serious literature, making little distinction between the two insofar as the description of the structures is concerned. Indeed, structuralism furnishes an ideal approach for comparative literature, and the method also enables critics to consolidate genres such as modern romances, detective tales, soap operas, and films.

Like the New Criticism, structuralism aims at comprehensiveness of description, and many critics would insist that the two are complementary and not separate. A distinction is that the New Criticism is at its best in dealing with smaller units of literature, whereas structuralism is best in the analysis of narratives and therefore larger units such as novels, myths, and stories. Because structuralism shows how fiction is organized into various typical situations, the approach merges with the *archetypal* approach, and at times it is difficult to find any distinctions between structuralism and archetypalism.

Structuralism, however, deals not just with narrative structures, but also with structures of any type, wherever they occur. For example, structuralism makes great use of linguistics. Modern linguistic scholars have determined that there is a difference between "deep structures" and "surface structures" in language. A structuralist analysis of style, therefore, would stress the ways in which writers utilize such structures. The structuralist interpretation of language also perceives distinguishing types or "grammars" of language that are recurrent in various types of literature. Suppose, for example, that you encounter opening passages like the following:

Once upon a time a young prince fell in love with a young princess. He decided to tell her of his love, and early one morning he left his castle on his white charger, riding toward her castle home high in the mountains.

Early that morning, Alan had found himself thinking about Anne. He had believed her when she said she loved him, but his feelings about her were not certain, and his thinking had left him still unsure.

The words of these two passages create different and distinct frames of reference. One is a fairy tale, the other the internalized reflection of feeling. The passages therefore demonstrate how language itself fits into predetermined patterns or structures. Similar uses of language structures can be associated with other types of literature.

**Example**

Young Goodman Brown is a hero who is passive, not active. Essentially, he is a witness, a receiver rather than a doer. His only action—taking his trip in the forest—occurs at the story's beginning. After that point, he no longer acts but instead is acted upon, and what he sees puts his life's beliefs to a test. Of course, many protagonists undergo similar testing (such as rescuing victims and slaying particularly terrible dragons), and they emerge triumphant. Not so with Goodman Brown. He is a responder who allows himself to be victimized by his own perceptions—or misperceptions. Despite all his previous experiences with his wife and with the good people of his village, he generalizes too hastily. He lets the single disillusioning experience of his nightmare govern his entire outlook on others, and thus he fails his test and turns his entire life into failure.

## FEMINIST

The feminist approach holds that most of our literature presents a masculine-patriarchal view in which the role of women is negated or at best minimized. As an adjunct of the feminist movement in politics, the feminist critique of literature seeks to raise consciousness about the importance and unique nature of women in literature.

Specifically, the feminist view attempts (1) to show that writers of traditional literature have ignored women and have also transmitted misguided and prejudiced views of them, (2) to stimulate the creation of a critical milieu that reflects a balanced view of the nature and value of women, (3) to recover the works of women writers of past times and to encourage the publication of present women writers so that the literary canon may be expanded to recognize women as thinkers and artists, and (4) to urge transformations in the language to eliminate inequities and inequalities that result from linguistic distortions.

In form, the feminist perspective seeks to evaluate various literary works from the standpoint of the presentation of women. For works such as "The Necklace" (story), "A Work of Artifice" (poem), and *The Bear* (play), a feminist critique would focus on how such works treat women and also on either the shortcomings or enlightenment of the author as a result of this treatment: How important are the female characters, how individual in their own right? Are they credited with their own existence and their own character? In their relationships with men, how are they treated? Are they given equal status? Ignored? Patronized? Demeaned? Pedestalized? How much concern do the male characters exhibit about women's concerns?

**Example**

At the beginning of "Young Goodman Brown," Brown's wife, Faith, is only peripheral. In the traditional patriarchal spirit of wife-as-adjunct, she asks her

husband to stay at home and take his journey at another time. Hawthorne does not give her the intelligence or dignity, however, to let her explain her concern (or might he not have been interested in what she had to say?), and she therefore remains in the background with her pink hair ribbon as her distinguishing characteristic. During the mid-forest Satanic ritual she appears again and is given power, but only the power to cause her husband to go astray. Once she is led in as a novice in the practice of demonism, her husband falls right in step. Unfortunately, by following her, Brown may conveniently excuse himself from guilt by claiming that "she" had made him do it, just as Eve "made" Adam eat the apple. Hawthorne's attention to the male hero, in other words, permits him to distort the female's role.

## ECONOMIC DETERMINIST/MARXIST

The concept of cultural and economic determinism is one of the major political ideas of the last century. Karl Marx (1818–1883) emphasized that the primary influence on life was economic, and he saw society as an opposition between the capitalist and working classes. The literature that emerged from this kind of analysis features individuals in the grips of the class struggle. Often called "proletarian literature," it emphasizes persons of the lower class—the poor and oppressed who spend their lives in endless drudgery and misery, and whose attempts to rise above their disadvantages usually result in renewed suppression.

Marx's political ideas were never widely accepted in the United States and have faded still more after the political breakup of the Soviet Union, but the idea of economic determinism (and the related term "Social Darwinism") is still credible. As a result, much literature can be judged from an economic perspective: What is the economic status of the characters? What happens to them as a result of this status? How do they fare against economic and political odds? What other conditions stemming from their class does the writer emphasize (e.g., poor education, poor nutrition, poor health care, inadequate opportunity)? To what extent does the work fail by overlooking the economic, social, and political implications of its material? In what other ways does economic determinism affect the work? How should readers consider the story in today's developed or underdeveloped world? Seemingly, the specimen work "Young Goodman Brown" has no economic implications, but an economically oriented discussion might take the following turns:

**Example**

"Young Goodman Brown" is a fine story just as it is. It deals with the false values instilled by the skewed acceptance of sin-dominated religion, but it overlooks the economic implications of this situation. One suspects that the real story in the little world of Goodman Brown's Salem should be about survival and the disruption that an alienated member of society can produce. After Brown's con-

demnation and distrust of others force him into his own shell of sick imagination, Hawthorne does not consider how such a disaffected character would injure the economic and public life of the town. Consider this, just for a moment: Why would the people from whom Brown recoils in disgust want to deal with him in business or personal matters? Would they want to follow his opinion in town meetings on crucial issues of public concern and investment? Would his preoccupation with sin and damnation make him anything more than a horror in his domestic life? Would his wife, Faith, be able to discuss household management with him, or how to take care of the children? All these questions of course are pointed toward another story—a story that Hawthorne did not write. They also indicate the shortcomings of Hawthorne's approach, because it is clear the major result of Young Goodman Brown's selfish preoccupation with evil would be a serious disruption of the economic and political affairs of his small community.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL/PSYCHOANALYTIC[1]

The scientific study of the mind is a product of psychodynamic theory as established by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and of the psychoanalytic method practiced by his followers. Psychoanalysis provided a new key to the understanding of character by claiming that behavior was caused by hidden and unconscious motives and drives. It was greeted as a virtual revelation, and not surprisingly it had a profound effect on twentieth-century literature.

In addition, its popularity produced a psychological/psychoanalytic approach to criticism. Some critics use the approach to explain fictional characters, as in the landmark interpretation by Freud and Ernest Jones that Shakespeare's Hamlet suffers from the "Oedipus Complex." Still other critics use it as a way of analyzing authors and the artistic process. For example, John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu* presents a detailed examination of the mind, reading, and neuroses of Coleridge, the author of "Kubla Khan."

Critics using the psychoanalytic approach treat literature somewhat like information about patients in therapy. In the work itself, what are the obvious and hidden motives that cause a character's behavior and speech? How much background (childhood trauma, adolescent memories, etc.) does the author reveal about a character? How purposeful is this information with regard to the character's psychological condition? How much is important in analyzing and understanding the character?

In the consideration of authors, critics utilizing the psychoanalytic mode consider questions like these: What particular life experiences explain characteristic subjects or preoccupations? Was the author's life happy? miserable? upsetting? solitary? social? Can the death of someone in the author's family be associated with melancholy situations in that author's work? (All

eleven of the brothers and sisters of the English poet Thomas Gray, for example, died before reaching adulthood. Gray was the only one to survive. In his poetry, Gray often deals with death, and he is therefore considered as one of the "Graveyard School" of eighteenth-century poets. A psychoanalytical critic might make much of this connection.)

### Example

At the end of "Young Goodman Brown," Hawthorne's major character is no longer capable of normal existence. His nightmare should be read as a symbol of what in reality would have been lifelong mental subjection to the type of puritanical religion that emphasizes sin and guilt. Such preoccupation with sin is no hindrance to psychological health if the preoccupied people are convinced that God forgives them and grants them mercy. In their dealings with others, they remain healthy as long as they believe that other people have the same sincere trust in divine forgiveness. If their own faith is short and uncertain, however, and they cannot believe in forgiveness, then they are likely to project their own guilt—really a form of personal terror—into others. They remain conscious of their own sins, but they find it easy to claim that others are sinful—even those who are spiritually spotless, and even their own family, who should be dearest to them. When this process of projection occurs, such people have created the rationale of condemning others because of their own guilt. The cost they pay is a life of gloom, a fate that Hawthorne makes for Goodman Brown after the nightmare about demons in human form.

## ARCHETYPAL/SYMBOLIC/MYTHIC[2]

The archetypal approach, derived from the work of the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1875–1961), presupposes that human life is built up out of patterns, or *archetypes* ("first molds" or "first patterns"), that are similar throughout various cultures and historical times. The approach is similar to the structuralist analysis of literature, for both approaches stress the connections that may be discovered in literature written in different times and in vastly different locations in the world.

In literary evaluation, the archetypal approach is used to support the claim that the very best literature is grounded in archetypal patterns. The archetypal critic therefore looks for archetypes such as God's creation of human beings, the sacrifice of a hero, or the search for paradise. How does an individual story, poem, or play fit into any of the archetypal patterns? What truths does this correlation provide (particularly truths that cross historical, national, and cultural lines)? How closely does the work fit the archetype? What variations may be seen? What meaning or meanings do the connections have?

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[1]See also Chapter 4, "Writing About Character: The People in Literature."

[2] Symbolism and myths are also considered in Chapter 10.

The most tenuous aspect of archetypal criticism is Jung's assertion that the recurring patterns provide evidence for a "universal human conscious-ness" that all of us, by virtue of our humanity, still retain in our minds and in our very blood.

Not all critics accept the hypothesis of a universal human conscious-ness, but they nevertheless consider the approach important for comparisons and contrasts (see Chapter 13). Many human situations, such as adolescence, dawning love, the search for success, the reconciliation with one's mother and father, and the encroachment of age and death, are similar in structure and may be analyzed as archetypes. For example, the following situations may be seen as a pattern or archetype of initiation: A young man discovers the power of literature and understanding ("On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"); a man determines the importance of truth and fidelity amidst uncertainty ("Dover Beach"); a man and woman fall in love despite their wishes to remain independent (*The Bear*); a woman gains strength and integrity because of previously unrealized inner resources ("The Necklace"). The archetypal approach encourages the analysis of variations on the same theme, as in Glaspell's *Trifles*, when the two women develop their impromptu cover-up of the crime (one sort of initiation) and also begin to assert their freedom of thought and action independent of their husbands (another sort).

### Example

In the sense that Brown undergoes a change from psychological normality to rigidity, the story is a reverse archetype of the initiation ritual. According to the archetype of successful initiation, initiates seek to demonstrate their wor-thiness to become full-fledged members of society. Telemachus in Homer's *Odyssey*, for example, is a young man who in the course of the epic goes through the initiation rituals of travel, discussion, and battle. But in "Young Good-man Brown" we see initiation in reverse, for just as there is an archetype of suc-cessful initiation, Brown's initiation leads him into failure. In the private areas of life on which happiness depends he falls short. He sees evil in his fellow vil-lagers, condemns his own minister, and shrinks even from his own wife. His life is one of despair and gloom. His suspicions are those of a Puritan of long ago, but the timeliness of Hawthorne's story is that the archetype of misunder-standing and condemnation has not changed. Today's headlines of misery and war are produced by the same kind of intolerance that is exhibited by Goodman Brown.

## DECONSTRUCTIONIST

The *Deconstructionist* approach—which Deconstructionists explain not as an approach but rather as a performance—was developed by the French critic Jacques Derrida (b. 1930). In the 1970s and 1980s it became a major but also

controversial mode of criticism. As a literary theory, Deconstructionism pro-duces a type of analysis that stresses ambiguity and contradiction.

A major principle of Deconstructionism is that Western thought has been *logocentric*; that is, Western philosophers have assumed that central truth is knowable and entire. The Deconstructionist view is that there is no central truth because circumstances and time, which are changeable and sometimes arbitrary, govern the world of the intellect. This analysis leads to the declara-tion "All interpretation is misinterpretation." That is, literary works cannot be encapsulated as organically unified entireties, and therefore there is not *one correct interpretation* but only *interpretations*, each one possessing its own validity.

In "deconstructing" a work, therefore, the Deconstructionist critic raises questions about what other critics have claimed about the work: Is a poem accepted as a model of classicism? Then it also exhibits qualities of romanti-cism. Is a story about a young Native American's flight from school com-monly taken as a criticism of modern urban life? Then it may also be taken as a story of the failure of youth. In carrying out such criticism, Deconstruction-ist critics place heavy emphasis on the ideas contained in words such as *ambivalence, discrepancy, enigma, uncertainty, delusion, indecision,* and *lack of res-olution,* among others.

The Deconstructionist attack on "correct," "privileged," or "accepted" readings is also related to the principle that language, and therefore literature, is unstable. "Linguistic instability" means that the full understanding of words is never exact because there is a never-ending *play* between the words in a text and their many shades of meaning, including possible future mean-ings. That is, the words do not remain constant and produce a definite meaning, but instead call forth the possibility of "infinite substitutions" of meaning. Each work of literature is therefore ambiguous and uncertain because its full meaning is constantly being *deferred*. This infinite play or semantic tension renders language unstable and makes correct or accepted readings impossible.

It is fair to state that Deconstructionism, among all the literary theories, has received intense criticism that has sometimes bordered on discrediting the theory entirely. A number of critics find that the position is elusive and vague. They grant that literary works are often ambiguous, uncertain, and apparently contradictory, but explain that the cause of these conditions is not linguistic instability but rather authorial intention. They also point out that the Deconstructionist linguistic analysis is derivative and misunderstood, and that it does not support Deconstructionist assertions about linguistic instability. Critics also draw attention to the contradiction that Deconstruc-tionism cannot follow its major premise about there being no "privileged readings" because it must recognize the privileged readings in order to inval-idate or "subvert" them.

## Example

There are many uncertainties in the details of "Young Goodman Brown." If one starts with the stranger on the path, one might conclude that he could be Brown's father, because he recognizes Brown immediately and speaks to him jovially. On the other hand, the stranger could be the devil (he is recognized as such by Goody Cloyse) because of his wriggling walking stick. After disappearing, the stranger also takes on the characteristics of an omniscient cult leader, because at the Satanic celebration he knows all the secret sins committed by Brown's neighbors and the community of greater New England. Additionally, he might represent a perverted conscience whose aim is to mislead and befuddle people by steering them into the holier-than-thou judgmentalism that Brown adopts. This method would be truly diabolical—to use religion in order to bring people to their own damnation. That the stranger is an evil force is therefore clear, but the pathways of his evil are not as clear. He seems to work his mission of damnation by reaching souls like that of Goodman Brown through means ordinarily attributed to conscience. If the stranger represents a Satanic conscience, what are we to suppose that Hawthorne is asserting about what is considered real conscience?

# READER-RESPONSE[3]

The theory of Reader-Response is rooted in *phenomenology*, a branch of philosophy that deals with "the understanding of how things appear." The phenomenological idea of knowledge is that reality is to be found not in the external world itself but rather in the mental *perception* of externals. That is, all that we human beings can know—actual *knowledge*—is our collective and personal understanding of the world and our conclusions about it.

As a consequence of the phenomenological concept, Reader-Response theory holds that the reader is a necessary third party in the author–text–reader relationship that constitutes the literary work. The work, in other words, is not fully created until readers make a *transaction* with it by assimilating it and *actualizing* it in the light of their own knowledge and experience. The representative questions of the theory are these: What does this work mean to me, in my present intellectual and moral makeup? What particular aspects of my life may help me understand and appreciate the work? How can the work improve my understanding and widen my insights? How can my increasing understanding help me understand the work more deeply? The theory is that the free interchange or transaction that such questions bring about leads toward interest and growth so that readers may assimilate literary works and accept them as part of their lives.

As an initial way of reading, the Reader-Response method may be personal and anecdotal. In addition, by stressing response rather than interpre-

[3] See "Special Writing Topics for Likes and Dislikes" in Chapter 2, p. 48.

tation, one of the leading exponents of the method (Stanley Fish) has raised the extreme question about whether texts, by themselves, have objective identity. These aspects have been cited as both a shortcoming and an inconsequentiality of the method.

It is therefore important to stress that the Reader-Response theory is *open.* It permits beginning readers to bring their own personal reactions to literature, but it also aims at increasing the discipline and skills of readers. The more that readers bring to literature through lifelong interests and disciplined studies, the more "competent" and comprehensive their responses will be. With cumulative experience, the disciplined reader will habitually adjust to new works and respond to them with increasing skill. If the works require special knowledge in fields such as art, politics, science, philosophy, religion, or morality, then competent readers will possess such knowledge or seek it out, and utilize it in improving their responses. Also, because students experience many similar intellectual and cultural disciplines, it is logical to conclude that responses will tend not to diverge but rather to coalesce; agreements result not from personal but from cultural similarities. The Reader-Response theory, then, can and should be an avenue toward informed and detailed understanding of literature, but the initial emphasis is the transaction between readers and literary works.

## Example

"Young Goodman Brown" is a worrisome story because it shows so disturbingly that good intentions may cause harmful results. I think that a person with too high a set of expectations is ripe for disillusionment, just as Goodman Brown is. When people don't measure up to this person's standard of perfection, they can be thrown aside as though they are worthless. They may be good, but their past mistakes make it impossible for the person with high expectations to endure them. I have seen this situation occur among some of my friends and acquaintances, particularly in romantic relationships. Goodman Brown makes the same kind of misjudgment, expecting perfection and turning sour when he learns about flaws. It is not that he is not a good man, because he is shown at the start as a person of belief and stability. He uncritically accepts his nightmare revelation that everyone else is evil (including his parents), however, and he finally distrusts everyone because of this enduring suspicion. He cannot look at his neighbors without avoiding them like an "anathema," and he turns away from his own wife "without a greeting" (paragraph 70). Brown's problem is that he equates being human with being unworthy. By such a distorted standard of judgment, all of us fail, and that is what makes the story so disturbing.