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TE 850: Defining “Critical”

The word “critical” comes to us from the Latin “criticus” and was used as early as the 1600’s. In the medical arena, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2014) cites this term to suggest a stage of uncertainty or risk. A patient may have been deemed “critical” if his health was in poor condition. Similarly, the *OED* suggests a “critical path” as the point in which a medical operation must occur. In the 1800’s critical began to enter areas of math and science, as it described a turning point or a passing of one stage to another as well as the describing of an extreme case. More recently in 1949, nuclear physics coined the phrase “to go critical” when the maintaining of a self-sustaining chain reaction was evident. As an adjective, this word could be seen as early as Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Othello* to be “given to judgment,” and is noted in later works for stemming into “being skilled at criticism” (see Macaulay’s *Critical and Historical Essays*). Critical theory’s earliest citing sprouted in 1937 with Horkheimer’s *kritische Theorie* as a “dialectical critique of society” which as Borsheim-Black, Macaluso and Petrone (2014) state, “might be described as a broad, interdisciplinary, neo-Marxist approach to criticism and critique of society with a commitment to social change. Critical social theory posits that all knowledge is constructed and ideological; therefore, questioning representation and normativity is part of working toward social transformation” (Abstract, para. 3)

Critical has more recently made a leap in to the word of literature. In their article *Critical Literature Pedagogy*, authors Borsheim-Black, Macaluso and Petrone cite critical literacy as stemming from critical theory. This literacy, they suggest, breaks away from the popular canons of literature often taught in schools. Similar to critical theory, critical literature emphasizes the

questioning of the representation and normativity of these traditional texts. Due to this questioning, a variety of text styles and text genres may be examined within the framework of critical literature. Here, the authors argue (as cited in Luke, 2000) critical literacy “focuses on teaching and learning how texts work, understanding and re-mediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and moving students toward active position-takings with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields in which they live and work” (Abstract, para.5). A text then that is viewed as “critical” will be one that spurs a change in thinking or acting. Furthermore, it will be one that has the potential to shape a worldview or perspective.

When considering works noted as “critical”, one should consider another definition from the *OED*, where critical can be defined as “tending to determine or decide, decisive, crucial.” A text deemed critical may be one in which its characters determine and decide how to cope through the struggles that feel critical to adolescents, as argued by author Janet Alsup. By lifting up Leslie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*, Alsup (2003) points to one example of a work worthy of being deemed critical. In *Speak*, high-school freshman Melinda is raped at a party and calls the police in response. Afterward, she is viewed as an outcast by her friends and the student body, while the rape and the rapist haunt her. Readers hear her inner thoughts through Anderson’s work, as Melinda comes to terms with what happens and finally breaks the silence of her traumatic experience. While Alsup notes a text that is critical, such as *Speak*, may make adults and young readers feel uncomfortable, their real-life subject matter provides guidance and comfort for readers, where traditional canons leave readers feeling disengaged (p.161). Similarly, Sherman Alexie (2011), author of the article *Why the Best Kids Books are Written in Blood*, speaks out about his stance on crucial texts for teens stating, “I vividly remember what it felt like to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers. I don’t write to protect them. It’s far too late for

that. I write to give them weapons—in the form of words and ideas—that will help them fight their monsters. I write in blood because I remember what it felt like to bleed.” Here, critical in regards to literature can be represented in texts to help readers make definitive choices when dealing with the challenges of adolescent life.

Breaking away from traditional canons, a critical text may question just who has the authority to tell a story and the affect it may have on readers. Walter Dean Myer’s work, *Monster*, for instance, gives this authority to an unlikely character; Steve Harmon, a young, black man on trial for murder. Through his story, told through a movie script and journal entry, Myers gives voice to Steve while changing boundaries of the traditional nature of storytelling. In an interview about his work, Myers inspiration for *Monster* came from the stories of young men like Steve (personal communication, Apr. 8, 2014). When considering Myers’ work as critical, we can consider the potential it has to alter one’s course of action to prevent falling into the path Steve Harmon faced.

While the term critical may be given to a work that spurs change within oneself, critical may able be used to label texts that cause the reader to become agents of changes within society. Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* provides an account of young Jonas, who resists the norms of his community. While Lowry creates a dystopian society, any society built on structures of power could be the site of positive social activism for young adults (Latham, 2004, p.135). More recently, *The Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins’ tells of post-apocalyptic Panem and the rebellion against the cruel government led by Katniss, brings further consideration about the positive social change of young adults. Students reading accounts like *The Giver* and *The Hunger Games* may then consider how current social problems of the work force, hunger, and social classes relate to those in the novels (Borsheim-Black et al., Abstract, para.5).

While critical for these works brings about thoughts of what could be, other works within critical literature consider what has already happened. Accounts of the past can be critical as they suggest how our current views have been formed. In his article the use of graphic novel *Maus*, Christian W. Chun (2009) describes the work as being within the confines of critical. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* recounts the story of Vladek, a Holocaust survivor, who shares his story with his son. Representation of people groups is played with here; Jews are portrayed as mice while the Nazis are cats. *Maus*’ visual display of the horrors of the Holocaust could be noted for being critical as it serves to develop a more realistic understanding of the past, vastly different, Chun argues, than the watered-down account students would read about in a history textbook. A critical work of a historical event, like the Holocaust in *Maus* would allow the reader to feel connected to history rather than removed from it. As Chun writes, “An understanding of the reasons why texts are written for specific readerships and how they achieve their purpose in conveying particular messages is at the heart of critical literature” (p.147).

During the process of reading critical literature, readers gain a better understanding of the purpose in what it read as well as the reasons for reading a certain text. As Nodelman and Reimer point out, most texts for children are read for evoking feelings of pleasure- feelings support what is familiar and what is comfortable. At the same time, the authors note other texts are read for encouraging feelings of bliss- feelings that break away from familiarity. Traditionally, children’s literature and reading instruction has supported reading for feelings of pleasure (23-24). Texts that constitute feelings of bliss are not ones adults have normally put on the shelves for young readers. In addition, Nodelman and Reimer write, “many adults spend much of their time trying to dissuade children from paying attention to the “ideas” their bodies have that are at odds with socially acceptable ones. These adults are unlikely to offer children

access to texts that encourage indulgence in such ideas (24).” Some of the previously noted “critical” texts may fall into this category.

Today however, “critical” in the world of literature is something of a buzzword, as children are called to read critical in the ways they question, analyze and debate texts. Reading critically may invite students to read against a text, even those in traditional canons that are encouraged in schools. In reading critically, we see how “critical” collides with our understanding of “criticism.” A critical reading against a text allows the reader, for instance, to challenge why a traditional canon text is so prominent, while questioning why dominant narratives and ideologies are seen so often and reinforced in these texts (Borsheim-Black et al., *Canonicity*, table 1). The process of reading critically may also require readers to question the validity of a text, searching for credibility in sources. In their chapter in *Best Practices for Literacy Instruction* (2011), Ogle and Lang stress the importance of teaching students to read with a critical eye by reading multiple sources, checking to see how various authors have presented similar content (p.151).

A final result of critical reading allows readers to enter conversations with one another about a text. Critical reading leads to critical dialogue in which readers share their experiences with a text both verbally and in writing. In this process of intertextuality, Nodelman and Reimer state,

Every time you read a text or discuss a text you read with someone else, you become part of the network. You learn more about the components of the network and, in your own response and conversation, add something to it. All readers and all people who discuss their reading are in the process of making literature, of making it mean more to themselves and to others (27).

The word “critical” has been linked with many meanings in many different arenas. Whether we are using “critical” to describe the medical state of a patient, a person’s decision, a particular novel, or lenses used to read a text, we know that when something is “critical,” it is of great importance.

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