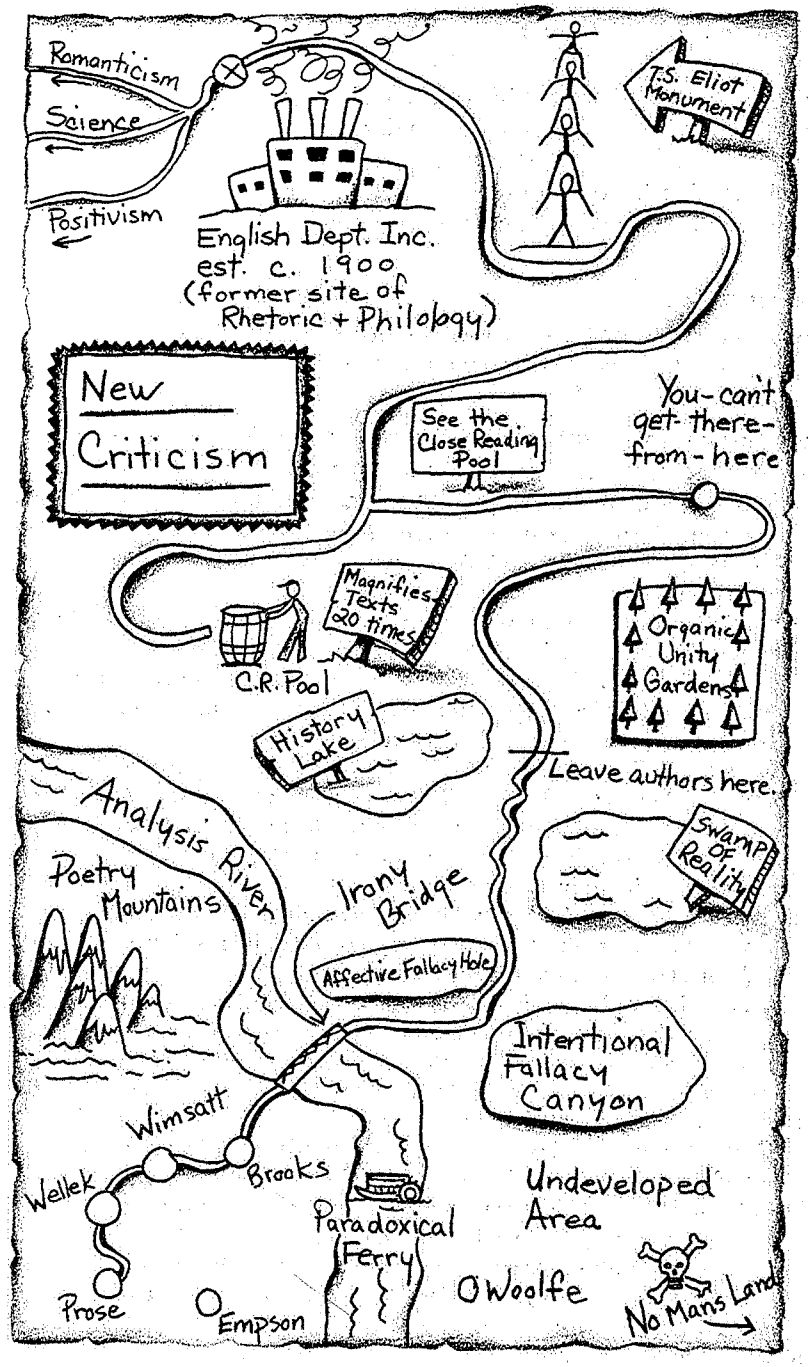

CHAPTER 3

Unifying the Work

New Criticism

The study of literature means the study of literature, not of biography nor of literary history (incidentally of vast importance), not of grammar, not of etymology, not of anything except the works themselves, viewed as their creators wrote them, viewed as art, as transcripts of humanity—not as logic, not as psychology, not as ethics.

—Martin Wright Sampson

The Purpose of New Criticism

For much of the previous century, "traditional" criticism was in large part synonymous with what has become known as "New Criticism." This way of looking at literature began to emerge clearly in the 1920s and dominated literary criticism from the late 1930s into the 1960s. In 1941, John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* gave this movement its name (even though the point of Ransom's book, ironically, is that *the* New Critic had not appeared). Its effects continue even to the present day, when it might better be called "the old New Criticism." Although those who have been called "New Critics" have not agreed in every respect, and some have even rejected the title, it is possible to identify a number of fundamental assumptions shared by an enormous number of critics and teachers and their students. The odds, in fact, are excellent that some of your English teachers were trained in the methods of New Criticism, even if they never heard the term; and in surprisingly many classrooms today, even in the midst of a cornucopia of critical options, New Criticism is often

essentially the only approach on the menu, its principles so pervasive that they seem natural and obvious—and therefore remain, often enough, unarticulated.

Basic Principles Reflected

One way to get at these principles, and begin to see why they have remained so appealing, might be to look at a famous poem written about the time that New Criticism was emerging as a critical force. This poem is of particular interest because it is about poetry, attempting to define it, advising us how to view it. Thus it seeks to provide a kind of guide for criticism: "Here is what poetry ought to be," the poem says; "read it with these standards in mind." Widely anthologized in introduction-to-literature texts since its appearance, the poem not only reflects the ideas of a nascent New Criticism, but it also probably helped to promote those ideas over several generations. Read it through carefully a few times, noting any questions or confusions that arise. It will be discussed in detail below.

Ars Poetica

Archibald MacLeish

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.

(1926)

The poem is startling from its opening lines, asserting that a poem should be "palpable and mute." How can a poem possibly be "palpable," or "capable of being handled, touched, or felt" (*American Heritage Dictionary*)? Whether we think of a poem as an idea, or a group of ideas, or the writing on a piece of paper, or a group of spoken words, none of these seems to be the sort of thing we can handle. And how can a poem be "mute"? Isn't a poem made of words? Don't we at least imagine a voice speaking the words? Suggesting that a poem be mute seems a bit like suggesting that a movie be invisible, or a song be inaudible, or a sculpture be without shape.

But MacLeish reiterates these ideas in subsequent lines, saying explicitly that a poem should be "Dumb," "Silent," and (most amazingly) "wordless" (lines 3, 5, and 7). He uses comparisons that reinforce particularly the idea of being "palpable." In comparing the poem to a "fruit," for instance, MacLeish suggests that the poem should be a real thing, having substance. The idea that it should be "globed" (a "globed fruit") emphasizes the three-dimensionality that MacLeish desires: like a globe, the poem should have more extension in time and space than a map or a picture. Not just a depiction of a fruit, it should *be* a *globed* fruit. Likewise, "old medallions to the thumb" and "the sleeve-worn stone / Of casement ledges where the moss has grown" are both not only "silent" or "dumb," but they also have an enduring solidity, a tangible reality. These images of fruit, old medallions, and worn ledges may also seem a bit mysterious, like "the flight of birds" (line 8), which in some "wordless," seemingly magical way is organized and orchestrated—as anyone knows who's ever seen a flock of birds rise together and move as one, silently.

From lines 1–8, then, we draw our first principle of New Criticism:

☞ 1. A poem should be seen as an object—an object of an extraordinary and somewhat mysterious kind, a silent object that is not equal to the words printed on a page.

Lines 9–16 articulate another idea: "A poem should be motionless in time." This idea seems easy enough to understand: MacLeish

believes that poems shouldn't change. Aren't Shakespeare's sonnets the same today as they were when he wrote them? ("So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee," as Sonnet 18 says.) But MacLeish's comparison, "As the moon climbs," is not so easy to grasp: how can the moon be "climbing" through the sky, yet "motionless in time"? Perhaps the answer lies in the repeated idea that the moon, like the poem, should be "Leaving, as the moon releases / Twig by twig the night-entangled trees" (11–12); it should be "Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves / Memory by memory the mind" (13–14). Something that is "leaving" is neither fully here nor fully gone; it is caught in time and space, in an in-between contradictory timespace. We do not notice a memory deteriorating: it is there, unchanging; then it is only partly there; then it may be gone. The moon climbing in the sky does seem like this: it appears to sit there, motionless in time, yet it is leaving and will "release" the trees. MacLeish repeats lines 9–10 in lines 15–16, as if his own poem is motionless, continuing on but remaining in the same place it was.

This paradox adds to the mystery of the earlier lines and also suggests a second principle:

☞ 2. The poem as silent object is unchanging, existing somehow both within and outside of time, "leaving" yet "motionless."

Lines 17–18 offer a third surprising idea: "A poem should be equal to: / not true." It's difficult to believe that MacLeish is saying that poems should lie. But what is he saying? Lines 19–22 appear to explain his point, but these lines seem particularly difficult. What can these lines possibly mean—ignoring for the moment the concluding assertion of lines 23–24, which seems to be that poems ought not have meanings? The lines are obscure basically because the verbs are missing, so our task of making sense must include imagining what has been left out.

First MacLeish says, "For all the history of grief / An empty doorway and a maple leaf" (19–20). If we look closely at this statement, its form is familiar and clear enough: "For X, Y." Or, adding a verb, "For X, substitute Y." Thus, I take these lines to mean simply that instead of recounting "all the history of grief," the poet should present instead "An empty doorway and a maple leaf." An empty doorway can speak to us of someone departed, conveying an emptiness and an absence that may be more compressed and intense than an entire history of grief. A maple leaf, perhaps lying on the ground, bursting with fall colors inevitably turning to brown and crumbling, may tell us something about loss more directly and powerfully and concisely than any history book.

The next two lines are similarly structured: "For love / The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea." That is, "For love," an abstraction, impossible to grasp, the poet should present something concrete: "The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea." Although I can't say precisely how the grasses and lights here stand for love, somehow as images they do seem romantic, mysterious, moving. This principle of selecting something concrete to stand for an abstraction had already been advocated by T. S. Eliot in 1919 in what turned out to be an extremely influential opinion for the formation of New Criticism: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art," Eliot said, "is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion" (124–125). Not surprisingly, throughout its history New Criticism has been especially concerned with analyzing the imagery of particular works, noticing how a poem's "objective correlatives" structure its ideas.

It is not then that the poem should lie, but rather that it does not strive to tell the truth in any literal or historical or prosaic way. Poetry, MacLeish is saying, should speak metaphorically, substituting evocative images for the description of emotions, or historical details, or vague ideas. Instead of telling us about an idea or emotion, literature confronts us with *something* that may spark emotions or ideas. A poem is an experience, not a discussion of an experience.

The final two lines summarize this point in a startling way: "A poem should not mean / But be." Ordinarily we assume that words are supposed to convey a meaning, transferring ideas from an author to a reader. But the images that MacLeish's poem has given us—the globed fruit, the old medallions, the casement ledges, the flight of birds, the moon climbing, the empty doorway and the maple leaf, the leaning grasses and the two lights—these do not "mean" anything in a literal, historical, scientific way. What is the meaning, for example, of a flight of birds? Of a casement ledge where some moss has grown? These things just *are*. They are suggestive and even moving, but their meaning is something we impose on them; they simply exist, and we experience their being more powerfully than any abstract idea. It would be a mistake to think an empty doorway is somehow a *translation* of all the history of grief.

In much the same way, poems (MacLeish is asserting) do not mean, but rather have an existence—which takes us to the third principle:

☞ 3. Poems as unchanging objects represent an organized entity, not a meaning. In this way, poems are therefore fundamentally different from prose: prose strives to convey meaning; but poems

cannot be perfectly translated or summarized, for they offer a being, an existence, an experience perhaps—not a meaning.

Radicals in Tweed Jackets

What was the appeal of these principles? Why did New Criticism, a drastically new way of reading, become so popular on college campuses?

In the landmark study that did much to solidify the academic prestige of the New Criticism, Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949), René Wellek declares, "The work of art is an object of knowledge" (156). Because the literary work has an "objective" status, Wellek says, critical statements about a work are not merely opinions of taste. "It will always be possible," he maintains, "to determine which point of view grasps the subject most thoroughly and deeply." Thus, "all relativism is ultimately defeated" (156).

Although this assumption that the poem exists like an object, like fruit, like medallions, allows New Critics to think of literary criticism as a discipline just as rigorous and prestigious as a science, it is clear that for New Critics poems are in an important way also not like the objects studied by science. Poems, as MacLeish puts it, are "motionless in time"; they embody, as Marianne Moore says, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Thus, a poem is an entity somehow transcending time, existing in a realm different from that of science, the realm of the literary, of the imagination.

The implications of this second crucial assumption, that poems exist outside of time, can already be seen in the criticism of T. S. Eliot, whose ideas (as we just noted) influenced the New Critics. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot's famous essay of 1919, poetry is said to be "not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (10). The New Critics are aware of course that poems have authors, and they will sometimes refer to biographical information, but it is not the focus of their attention. Close reading of the work itself should reveal what the reader needs to know. Historical and biographical information, to be sure, may sometimes be helpful, but it should not be essential.

This exclusion of authors and their contexts is taken to what might appear to be its logical extreme in Wimsatt and Beardsley's influential essay on "The Intentional Fallacy." Even when biographical and historical information is meticulously and voluminously gathered, as in the case of Lowe's work on Coleridge and Kubla Khan, Wimsatt and Beardsley question its value for reading the work. Even Coleridge's own account of how the poem came to him (in a dream, supposedly), Wimsatt and Beardsley say, does not tell us anything

about how to read the poem itself—even if we could be sure Coleridge is telling the truth. Only the poem can tell us how to read the poem.

By the same token, Wimsatt and Beardsley question the importance of the individual reader's response in "The Affective Fallacy." The groundwork for their position had already been worked out in the 1920s by I. A. Richards. Richards conducted a series of close-reading experiments with his students at Cambridge. He began with the assumption that students should be able to read poems richly by applying careful scrutiny to the works themselves. To focus students' attention on the work itself, Richards would often remove the distraction of authors' names, dates, even titles. In 1929, when he reported his results in *Practical Criticism,* two things appeared to be clear.

First, his students seemed not to be very good at reading texts carefully. Richards thought, and many people agreed, that students obviously needed much more training in "close reading." They needed to learn how to look carefully at a text, suppressing their own variable and subjective responses, as Wimsatt and Beardsley would later persuasively argue. How a work affects a particular reader, Wimsatt and Beardsley assert, is not critically significant. Whereas "the Intentional Fallacy," they say, "is a confusion between the poem and its origins," the "Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results*" (21). Biographers may want to speculate on the poet's intention, and psychologists may want to theorize about a poem's effects, but literary critics should study the poem itself.

The second thing made evident by Richards' "experiments" was that such close reading was not only possible but very rewarding, as Richards himself was able to read these isolated works in revealing and stimulating ways, exposing unsuspected complexities and subtleties in the works he examined. Even in the following description of the creative process of poets, taken from Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's New Critical textbook, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), the author's intention is of little enduring interest:

> At the same time that he [the poet] is trying to envisage the poem as a whole, he is trying to relate the individual items to that whole. He cannot assemble them in a merely arbitrary fashion; they must bear some relation to each other. So he develops his sense of the whole, the anticipation of the finished poem, as he works with the parts, and moves from one part to another. Then as the sense of the whole develops, it modifies the process by which the poet selects and relates

> the parts, the words, images, rhythms, local ideas, events, etc. . . . It is an infinitely complicated process of establishing interrelations. (527)

Implicit in this description of how a poet works are the directions for what a critic should do: most obviously, the critic will want to recover the idea, or principle, or theme, that holds the poem's parts together and thereby reveal how the parts relate to each other and to the whole. (Such a careful unfolding of the poem's parts and their relationships is often called an "explication.") Although speculation about the poet's actual process of creating the poem may be entertaining, it is finally irrelevant, for the critic's real interest is in the finished poem, not how it was finished. We can tell what the poet was working toward, the poem as a whole, the "interrelations" of its parts, simply by looking carefully at the shape and structure of the poem—at its form, in other words.

This emphasis on a work's form has led some thinkers to link New Criticism to another movement, Russian formalism, which originated with the work of Viktor Shklovsky in 1917—about the same time that New Criticism's ideas first began to emerge in Western Europe and North America. The Russian formalists do seem to prefigure the New Criticism when they assume that a writer should be evaluated as a craftsman who fashions an artistic object. The writer should *not* be evaluated, New Critics and Russian formalists would agree, on the basis of the work's message. *Paradise Lost* is a great poem (or it isn't) because of Milton's artistic performance, not because of the validity of its theological or political message. Russian formalism (not too surprisingly) was rather short-lived, fading away by the late 1920s, discouraged by the Russian authorities, who no doubt noted that focusing on style and technique would tend to let all sorts of ideas float around.

Although New Criticism has been criticized at times for its lack of political commitment, one could argue (especially in light of Russian formalism's fate) that an attention to form (not message) is in fact a subtly powerful commitment to openness and freedom: you can say whatever you like, New Criticism implicitly suggests, as long as you say it well. Admittedly, in celebrating a certain kind of form (unified complexity), New Criticism has perhaps not been so entirely open in its actual practice, as feminist critics have persuasively argued, noticing the predominance of white males in the canon of works valued by New Critics. Is the relative absence of women in the traditional canon of New Criticism really a consequence of its principles? One could argue that women have tended to write in genres that may resist New Criticism's particular kind of close reading (in journals and letters, for instance), but certainly some women (Jane Austen, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf) have produced works celebrated by New Critical readings.

It is clear enough that New Criticism's kind of formalism, which turns away from politics, must take place within some (unacknowledged, invisible) political context, but at the same time it does not seem clear to me that any particular political stance is inherently more or less suited to New Critical strategies. New Criticism discriminates against works that are "poorly made" by its definition—works that are simplistic, single-sided, shallow, inarticulate, lacking in irony and self-consciousness. New Criticism champions works that repay our careful and imaginative attention, works that seem to challenge us to look again, to look more deeply, to find a more complex unity. It might even be said that New Criticism makes it both possible and necessary for other kinds of approaches to arise. At the least, many critics would agree that New Criticism remains a kind of "norm" against which other approaches can be delineated. At its best, it remains an exciting and revealing strategy for unfolding literary works.

How to Do New Criticism

To make sure the process is clear in your mind, let's think of it in three steps:

1. What complexities (or tensions, ironies, paradoxes, oppositions, ambiguities) can you find in the work?
2. What idea unifies the work, resolving these ambiguities?
3. What details or images support this resolution (that is, connect the parts to the whole)?

1. The first step assumes that great works are complex, even when they appear to be simple. Literature does not imitate life in any literal way, according to the New Critics; instead, poems (and other works) create realities of their own, transforming and ordering our experience. A poem, as Coleridge says, in a quotation often cited by New Critics, is an act of the imagination, "that synthetic and magical power"—an act that "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposites or discordant qualities" (11). Poems have the power, Coleridge says, "of reducing multitude into unity of effect." And, for the New Critics, the richer and more compelling the "multitude" of ideas or "discordant qualities," the greater the

poem's power. The sort of complexity that New Critics particularly value is captured in Keats's concept of "negative capability," which is also often cited by New Critics: it is the capability "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1:193).

When New Critics identify a poem's complexities (the first step here), they use a number of closely related terms, especially "irony," "ambiguity," "paradox," and "tension." Although these terms mean slightly different things, they all point to the idea of complexity—that the poem says one thing and means another, or says two things at once, or seems to say opposing things, or strains against its apparent meaning. For instance, in "The Language of Paradox," a celebrated essay from *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), Cleanth Brooks shows how Donne's famous poem "The Canonization" (included here in an Appendix) sets up a dilemma:

> Either: Donne does not take love seriously; here he is merely sharpening his wit as a sort of mechanical exercise. Or: Donne does not take sainthood seriously; here he is merely indulging in a cynical and bawdy parody. (11)

2. The second step assumes that great works do have a unifying idea, a theme. It's much more useful to think of this theme in terms of a complete thought or a sentence rather than a phrase. For instance, to say that the theme of Donne's "Canonization" is "love and religion" really doesn't tell us much about how Donne solves the dilemma of sainthood versus love. Here's what Brooks tells his readers:

> Neither account [that Donne doesn't take love seriously, or that he doesn't take religion seriously] is true; a reading of the poem will show that Donne takes both love and religion seriously; it will show, further, that the paradox is here his inevitable instrument. (11)

A cynical reader might observe (with some justification) that paradox is Donne's "inevitable" instrument because the New Critics inevitably find something like paradox in every great poem. But Brooks' point, of course, is that paradox is inevitable because Donne, with the imagination of a great poet, sets up the problem in such a way that only paradox will resolve it.

3. The third step unfolds or explicates the poem, indicating how the parts work together. This description of the poem is no substitute for the poem itself, but it should enrich our experience of it.

Oftentimes, as in the case of Brooks' essay on "The Canonization," the critic will move through the work carefully from beginning to end, dividing the work into parts, and then suggesting how every aspect of the parts relates to our sense of the whole. Following Aristotle's ancient ideas, New Critics have talked about the "organic unity" of works, as if the poem were a creature, a living being, with every part playing an essential role.

Here is a sample of Brooks' explication:

> In this last stanza, the theme receives a final complication. The lovers in rejecting life actually win the most intense life. This paradox has been hinted at earlier in the phoenix metaphor. Here it receives a powerful dramatization. (15)

In this passage, notice how Brooks identifies a paradox related to the theme and then connects that paradox to an earlier image. These are both characteristic moves for New Critics.

Film and Other Genres

These steps won't read a poem for you; they won't supply the sort of imagination, creativity, and attention you'll need to read literature closely. But they will help to structure your process of reading and writing, and they can in fact be used to help you analyze any kind of literary work or artistic object, or perhaps anything. Consider for example this concluding paragraph from Michael Atkinson's review of *Napoleon Dynamite,* a bizarre, award-winning film released in 2004 (to understand the paragraph, you should know that Jared Hess is the film's director, and Jon Heder plays Napoleon; also, Atkinson refers in this passage to a Todd Solondz film, *Welcome to the Dollhouse,* that offers a darker view of teen-age angst):

> But the center of Hess's cyclone is Heder and his tetherball-playing monster teen, who is both the film's forbidding hero and its great object of derision. Unlike the Solondz film, *Napoleon Dynamite* exudes little sense of social horror; it struggles to maintain a sunny disposition despite the traumatic social meltdown we witness and the apparent fact that Napoleon is headed not for a tech college but for a long, dire career in food service. He's all too emblematic of too many Americans, and if Hess's movie weren't so funny, it'd be a tragedy.

Even without seeing this movie, or reading the rest of the review, you can see the assumptions that are driving Atkinson's analysis. In the

first sentence, Napoleon, played by Heder, is paradoxically both "hero" and "object of derision." The adjective that modifies "hero" is "forbidding," while the adjective that modifies "object of derision" is "great," and this pulling in opposite directions also occurs in the description of Napoleon as a "tetherball-playing monster teen": tetherball is an elementary school game, played by children during recess—not at all what one associates with a "monster teen." The second sentence also celebrates the film's balancing of oppositions, maintaining "a sunny disposition despite the traumatic social meltdown we witness" and Napoleon's apparently dim future. The third and final sentence continues to see the film in paradoxical terms, as Napoleon's weirdness is somehow also "all too emblematic of too many Americans." As an earlier sentence puts it, Napoleon "is such a fantastic creation you can't help seeing him as both a catastrophically extreme case and the common flailing nerd we all still shelter in our deepest memory banks." This kind of both/and vision, unifying oppositions, extends even to the genre of the film, as Atkinson's conclusion asserts that the film is a comedy that would have been a tragedy, if it "weren't so funny."

Clearly Atkinson, like a New Critic, is noticing and valuing paradoxes, ironies, and tensions. Moreover, Atkinson sees how these oppositions are held together: The movie is dismal yet ultimately "sunny," a tragedy that is really a comedy; Napoleon is both heroic and ridiculous, "catastrophically extreme" and everyman. This idea, in fact, is arguably what unifies the film for Atkinson—that at some deeper level, we are like Napoleon. His absurdity is what sets him apart, and at the same what makes him part of us. We laugh at Napoleon, but he is constructed in such a way that we are also laughing at some core aspect of ourselves. Although Atkinson is obviously interested in how audiences respond to the film, he tends to view the movie as an artistic object, rather than an experience. He sees the character of Napoleon, for instance, as a coherent thing, "a perfectly conceived and executed battery of melodramatic harrumphs, bruised exhalations, defensive squints, clueless pronouncements, and explosively irate retorts." And the movie as a whole succeeds because its complex ironies and paradoxes are held together in a satisfying unity. Although I seriously doubt that Atkinson considers himself to be a card-carrying New Critic, his assumptions and values are in line with New Criticism—which isn't surprising, when we consider its pervasive popularity over the past century.

This brief look at a movie review suggests how we might reason backward from a finished essay to the strategies employed. To give you a better idea of how to use these principles, let's now work through the process of writing a sample New Critical essay in the next section.

The Writing Process: A Sample Essay

Literary works are often charming, uplifting, amusing; but they are also often troubling and challenging, confronting difficult and disturbing issues, stimulating our thought. The following poem will probably haunt you. It is a powerful and moving engagement with one of the most controversial and emotional topics of our day. Read it carefully, writing down any questions or comments that occur, looking particularly for tensions or oppositions or ambiguities.

The Mother

Gwendolyn Brooks

Abortions will not let you forget.
You remember the children you got that you did not get,
The damp small pulps with a little or no hair,