RIGHT TO LIFE IN LITERARY THEORY: THE SILENCE SCREAMS

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Recently, at Kent State University, I had the pleasure of being introduced to a foreign language. Well, not really a foreign language, but an alien language: English literary theory. I will be the first to confess publicly — as the other students in the literary criticism class thought — that most of the material discussed was irrelevant, obscure, or offensive.

But I came away from the course thinking how grand it is that now I know something of the critical vocabulary needed to tear apart anti-life writing and to bolster the status of pro-life writing.

Certainly, given the hostility most literary critics have towards the pro-life movement, one would think that established literary criticism would use whatever tools are at hand to promote an anti-life agenda.

This may indeed be the case. Literary theorists bring their various approaches to the study of literature to argue for the inclusion of women's experiences — except that the unborn woman is excluded. Literary theorists bring their approaches to literature to validate the experiences of marginalized groups in society such as homosexual men, lesbians, minorities, non-Western authors, etc. — a good thing to do, basically. But pro-lifers who are marginalized by an anti-life media or an anti-life academic power need not apply.

Pro-lifers, their viewpoints, their writings are left out of the discussion. The silence that literary theorists heap on our views offended me then when I had to read their works. The silence burying our issues offends me now. And now it is time for us, in true feminist literary critical

fashion, to speak out.

While there is a pervasive silence in current literary theories regarding the right to life issues, each of the major contemporary literary theories can be utilized to explicate pro-life truths embodied in our literature.

I will discuss pertinent aspects of these literary theories and interweave the applicability of the theory to the discussion of pro-life issues in literature. Since the theories will be presented in alphabetical order, I ask that you think of the acronym CDFMNRS. Senseless and meaningless, I know... as senseless and meaningless as why theorists would exclude the pro-life view from our literature.

In the final portion of this paper, I will document specific instances in literature where a pro-life viewpoint can be excavated (a word which I selected after great deliberation). Moreover, I believe that there is an emerging body of as yet noncanonical pro-life literature.

C IS FOR CULTURAL CRITICISM

The history of Cultural Criticism as a literary theory began with research among the working classes of Britain after the Second World War. In essence, Cultural Criticism attempts to incorporate surrounding aspects of a work of literature into its appreciation. While books as textual artifacts are an important element of the culture to be studied, other items in the culture to be studied include videos, photographs, print advertisements, televised commercials, political publications, etc.

The appreciation of elements in one's culture is not meant to be a static study. Regarding Cultural Criticism, the Right to Life movement may have been given its marching orders with the following statement by Jonathan Culler in his essay "Literary Theory":

> The desire of many critics and theorists [is] to make literary and cultural criticism politically progressive. This desire has stimulated work on noncanonical writings, especially those by members of groups that have been oppressed by or within Western cultures.... (217)

I think immediately of Jean Blackwood, who is certainly not part of the official canon — yet, that is, since Blackwood is a pro-life poet, one of those writers who have been marginalized by fellow feminists who, unlike her, are anti-life in philosophy. Blackwood's understanding of the forces behind abortion makes us aware of who is oppressed — and who oppresses — within Western cultures.

Taking a cultural studies approach, we can immediately justify the use of pro-life videos and pictures, as well as written texts, in the study of literature. All of these texts function to help the student understand a particular work. The photograph of the nearly 750,000 people who marched on Washington in 1990 should be as iconic as that of the 1963 civil rights march on Washington. Similarly, *The Silent Scream* should be as iconic as the famous photograph of the mother who died from her illegal abortion.

Equally important, the pro-life student reading a particular work which may be hostile to pro-lifers can incorporate into her critique of the work her own cultural artifacts which may disprove the anti-life intent of the author. An author who tries to convey an image of pro-lifers as uncaring or ultraconservative will have the rhetorical effect of his or her intention frustrated by a student who knows that the opposite is true. More forcefully, the suasive effect of anti-life writing can be frustrated by the pro-life student who can demonstrate that there are items in the catalog of the culture which show that pro-lifers are caring and may not necessarily all be stereotyped as uncaring political conservatives.

D IS FOR DECONSTRUCTION

To put us in the right frame to understand this theory, let me quote literary theorist Stephen Bonnycastle who claims that "You don't need deconstruction unless you are feeling oppressed" (90).

Deconstruction maintains that nothing expressed in language can be absolutely true (Bonnycastle 93). While deconstruction as a literary theory should not be reduced to mere word play, it does aim to demonstrate how the substantiation and fixed meaning of any term in a text can be replaced by a term in a subordinate position. Thomas Fink in a recent essay states

> Deconstruction seeks whatever latent rhetorical or other power may exist in the marginalized term, and this power almost always subverts the centrality of the previously privileged term. (241)

The rhetorical games which deconstructionist authors may play in their works conceal a profoundly serious philosophical goal. As Sharon Crowley demonstrates in her book, deconstruction wishes to achieve nothing more than the "obliterat[ion of] the doctrine of presence in Western metaphysics" — an important mission, without which deconstruction's further goal of displacing and replacing the objective meaning of specific terms is futile (x). In opposition to reader-response theories, deconstruction stresses the importance of the text over that of the author.

Deconstruction seems to me to be a great paralipsis. If deconstruction is a system where the text is shown to say "something other than what it appears to say," then this is a contortion of language which leads to paralipsis. Is this methodology a reading into the text? Possibly. However, if deconstruction questions the veracity and stability of each and every word in a text,

then we who are pro-life can apply the same methodology to current texts dealing with the life issues.

Was an author correct in using one word instead of another when describing pro-lifers? Is the pejorative term used by an anti-life author to describe pro-lifers or a pro-life activity actually the superior term which commands our respect? Is "picketing," for example, such an inferior term? Why? Why is the woman seeking an abortion not correctly called what she is — mother to an unborn child?

Finally, if deconstruction aims to subvert the privileged term of binary opposites, then we can work with the privileged terms of the anti-life movement to frustrate the political intent of those terms. Why should abortion necessarily be linked with "rights" when "wrongs" would be more proper? Why should the term "fetus" be used negatively as though designating a non-human entity, when it represents merely a stage in a human being's development? Our students can be empowered through deconstructive techniques to replace the privileged terms of an anti-life media or literature with the subversive (and correct) pro-life ones.

F IS FOR FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

It is this theory which would seem to be the most fertile area in which pro-life academics could argue their case that literature conveys essential pro-life themes. Those who read feminist literary tracts are, of course, disappointed that protection of the unborn child is not included in the agenda of feminist activists. It is understandable, however, when one considers that feminist literary theory strives primarily for the validation of women's experiences, previously neglected by what was perceived as a male-dominated (strictly patriarchal) mode of viewing the world.

Currently, it seems, the venom spewed forth comes

from women who have been oppressed by men and who think that abortion is a means toward their liberation. Pro-life women are only now having their voices heard.

Despite efforts to show how feminist studies will aid men in understanding their role in society, an anti-male bias still pervades the theory, evidenced by the extreme concern with not merely sexist stereotypes, but the dominance of patriarchy (which is always considered negatively) in women's lives. In fact, Naomi Schor emphatically reiterates this distrust of patriarchy in a recent essay when she shows that research in homosexual male studies "collaborates in feminism's unveiling of the phallus and the hierarchies it underwrites" (264). This gives new meaning to the phrase "Hey, fella, your zipper's down!"

Schor further argues that "the crime of rape has occupied a central place in feminist theory" (272). The pro-life professor would ask why abortion, which is at the center of the political hurricane of anti-life feminism, is not as aggressively mentioned as rape of women or rape of the environment (which feminism also chastises in its promotion of environmentally correct principles).

However, despite some objections to the explication of feminist viewpoints, pro-lifers can utilize specific aspects of the theory. *A Feminist Dictionary* can inspire us to create a pro-life dictionary, where words are truly inclusive of all viewpoints, including our own.

Feminist literary criticism can be used to validate the experiences of pro-life women. Much of feminism's experiences are anecdotal and are justified as literature — and correctly so. Everybody has a story. Everybody has a right to live. Everybody has something to say — including pro-life women.

Therefore, pro-life women should document their experiences and create a body of literature equally

potent with (in fact, superior to) anti-life experiences.

What is it like for a pro-life woman to march outside an abortion clinic knowing that her sisters are passing her by, going inside?

What is it like for the mother losing a baby by miscarriage to receive a phone call from somebody asking for help to persuade another young mother not to have an abortion willfully?

I think that the anecdotes of mothers suffering from Post-Abortion Syndrome (PAS) qualify immediately as vital new forces in the pro-life feminist canon. The stories of these women may be ignored by social scientists who may have political reasons not to admit that the performance of an abortion has consequences on the body and the psyche of the mother. These women's stories, however, cannot be ignored by other women, even anti-life women, because they are real. Since we pro-lifers have not ignored the accounts of abortions perpetrated by greedy and unsanitary abortionists, then all women — especially anti-life women — should give PAS mothers an equal respect.

Finally, adopting the view that the right to life position is as liberatory as feminist thinking will eclipse the power of the anti-life faction within feminism. It is empowering for a student to know that her pro-life beliefs are important. It is empowering for a student to know that her beliefs have been transmitted through literature for centuries.

M IS FOR MARXIST LITERARY THEORY

Terry Eagleton, the premier Marxist literary critic, states that

> Marxism is a scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming them; and what that means, rather more concretely, is that the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the

struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression. (vii)

Marxist literary theory strives for opening one's consciousness so that modes of production become evident in literature. Marxist literary theory can assist pro-lifers by helping us explicate what circumstances could possibly operate to permit some mothers to think of abortion as an "option." In fact, a pro-life analysis of the means of production within society can help a student understand how some mothers are forced to consider abortion as the only option forced on them.

Moreover, pro-life faculty can demonstrate another aspect of the anti-life movement, which embraces all three issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. To what degree do economic motives operate in literature for the killing of an unborn child, a handicapped child, or an elderly person? We do not need to whip out references in the *Wall Street Journal* to have our students recognize that abortion is big business. Carol Everett will tell us that. We similarly do not need to refer to the *Journal* to document how the killing of a Down Syndrome child alleviates not so much the physical pain of the child, but the embarrassment of the parents who don't want to be burdened with a less-than-perfect child. Of course, our students will understand that the use of the term "burden," in a Marxist literary sense, always implies a financial aspect. It does cost money to care for a handicapped child or an elderly person.

Furthermore, Marxist literary theory focuses on the dominant ideology operating within a work and how the reader can free him- or herself from that ideology. A point which is frequent in discussion of contemporary literary theory is especially enunciated in Marxist literary criticism. Often it is what is not said in a work which

indicates the dominant ideology which it embodies. "A work is tied to ideology" Eagleton writes

> not so much by what it says as by what it does not say. It is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences, that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt. (34)

We can find ample evidence of what is not said on behalf of the pro-life viewpoint in contemporary literature. More importantly, we can use Eagleton's words in the above quote almost verbatim to represent the struggle we pro-lifers must engage.

The key word for Marxism is struggle. We must struggle to have our pro-life voices heard. We must struggle to include our pro-life writings for discussion. It is this theory, with its emphasis on struggle, which I think has the most potential for pro-life literature. I'm willing to stand or sit corrected on this one.

N IS FOR NEW HISTORICISM

In a recent essay, Brook Thomas appropriates a quote from Christopher Lasch who argues that the problem with American culture is not narcissism, but amnesia. The inability to recall the past history of one's culture "is a precondition for what has been called a New Historicism" (86). This theory attempts to reintegrate historical study with explication of literary passages, two elements which were separated by New Critical pedagogy. This separation, Thomas further argues, "did not provide more solid ground for judgment but led to the deconstruction of all ground for judgment" (99).

A New Critical approach can be useful; it is certainly fun to have a student squirm over the meaning of a poem without knowing its historical context. It is the approach of New Historicism, however, which will make our students' appreciation of literature even richer.

Thus, if explicating Blackwood's poem "Generation," we who are pro-life academics are empowered to parallel the civil rights movement with the first civil right movement. I will defer specifics of this approach until we examine Blackwood's poem later.

R IS FOR READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

As Richard Beach argues, reader-response theories share "a concern with how readers make meaning from their experience with the text" (1). While Romanticism seemed preoccupied with the status of the author, and New Criticism seemed preoccupied with the text, literary critics are now concerned with how that text "works" for the reader. Reader-response theories can work for a student, can affect him or her, in five modes: the textual, the experiential, the psychological, the social, and the cultural.

Those who read Beach's work will be turned off by his demeaning patriarchal values, his seeming to find sexist meanings everywhere, and his apologetics for being a male, but his thoughts are interesting, especially because they can be useful for pro-life educators.

This shift in focus to the individual reader is itself a very pro-life concept. It is appropriate that we affirm the right of the individual to an interpretation of literature. To emphasize the individual once again is important for another reason. Within feminist literary discourse, for example, it is proper to speak of a feminist "subject" as opposed to the feminist "woman." The feminist "subject" is a combination of the representation of "women" (essence) and "woman" as an historical being. Similarly, the homosexual "subject" as opposed to the homosexual "man" or "woman" is a construction of the representation of "homosexuality" (essence) and the homosexual "man" or "woman" as an historical being.

Many of us will not be satisfied with considering our

students as "subjects," the current term which is used by literary theorists in place of the human being who reads a text. I teach the particular subject of English to particular human beings named John, Laura, Leslie, Omar, Pat, and Scott. I do not teach the subject of English to other subjects.

Another aspect of reader-response theories should serve the pro-life movement well. In discussing Jane Austen's *Emma*, Beach considers that which is missing from literary works. Readers can take issue with Austen's portrayal of genteel English life at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries in that the lower classes, the ones who work to support the English aristocracy, are rarely presented.

Pro-lifers can similarly ask from a contemporary work, especially if it is anti-life: what's missing? Why does Mary Logue omit favorable characterizations of pro-lifers in her anti-life novel, *Still Explosion*? Why is no pro-life character sympathetically portrayed? Why should the pro-life activists in her diatribe be involved in bombing abortion mills instead of, like real-life activists, working for pregnancy support groups?

S IS FOR STRUCTURALISM

As developed from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralism defines language "as a system that offers you a set of categories for understanding the world" (Bonnycastle 61).

The first function of structuralism is to designate the polarities operating within a text. Its attention to paradigmatic elements demonstrates that a work will reference an overriding paradigm; attention to syntagmatic elements in a work helps the reader understand why a particular term in the series of the grammatical construct was used instead of any other.

Bonnycastle in his *In Search for Authority* points out

that literature has undergone a paradigm shift over the last few decades, much like those discussed by Thomas Kuhn in his work with scientific paradigms. Dr. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, in his work with medical ethics, demonstrated last night how a shift in the appreciation in and application of the Hippocratic Oath similarly occurred only recently in human history. Unfortunately, all three shifts have brought about the present situation in academia where absolute truths are doubted. "Once you become aware of the existence of paradigms," Bonnycastle asserts, "and how they influence the way people think about the world, you can see that the `truths' about the world — about religion, politics, and even science — are not absolute truths; they depend on particular paradigms" (42).

The application of structuralist principles can be liberating for the pro-life professor. No longer are we bound to adopt an anti-life interpretation of a literary text, if we understand the paradigm being used in its formation. If an author uses a paradigm of a world where women have an absolute right to kill their unborn children, or a world where the elderly have an absolute right to have themselves killed by assisted-suicide, then we can question the literary work which espouses these actions since the absence of absolute rules, according to anti-lifers, do not apply.

PRO-LIFE ELEMENTS IN THE CANON

While literary theorists have formed and based their theories on certain works and trends in literature, there should be recognized also the emergence of an increasing pro-life canon.

The canon of pro-life literature can — indeed must — be constructed archaeologically. Our work as pro-life educators is truly an excavation: we must first sift

through the various theoretical layers covering a text, much like archaeologists uncover an ancient city. Having sifted through the various theoretical layers, our task is to reaffirm the importance of a literary work. Literary archaeology is not new. Naomi Schor states that "Woolf undertook through an archaeology of women's writing to theorize and valorize a specifically female subjectivity and textuality, and that specificity was bound up with the maternal" (266). As feminist literary theory was compelled to dig into past literary works to show that women's writing was not only being produced, but important, so we who are pro-life educators must archaeologically recapture our literature.

▪ James Fenimore Cooper's *Deerslayer* can be viewed by the student as just a weighty novel written in thick nineteenth century language depicting life on the frontier of colonial New York. It is also a battleground of values concerning what constitutes valued life. Hetty, described negatively as a "retarded" woman, is further described as one who has been "struck by God's power" (15). The striking is apparently positive, for Hetty refines the way other characters view life.

▪ Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* may be viewed in contemporary terms as a prototype of the dysfunctional family, modeled on contemporary sexual values. A pro-life reader-response application of this novel, however, would have our students identify with Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth as actors in the great drama of a woman who chose a pro-life course of action: giving her baby life in the face of obstacles from her lover, her husband, and her community. After all, the relief promised and often performed by characters like Mistress Hibbins (a follower of the Black Prince) was available to Hester. True to a reader-response methodology, our students'

own experiences with single parenthood are validated by the actions of these characters.

While I am unfamiliar with characteristics of your student populations, I can comment on those of students at Cuyahoga Community College. According to statistics generated by the College's Office of Academic and Student Affairs, most students usually entered the college between the ages of 20-24: in 1994, 6,876 students. The second highest age category is the 25-29 year old age group: for 1994, 4,153 students. The average age of the CCC student, dominantly a woman, is, due to the general aging of our population, increasing towards the age of twenty-nine years.

Many of these young women who are either unmarried with children, or divorced, or who have been abandoned by their boyfriends/husbands/lovers can identify with Hester's situation. They can come to understand intellectually and, perhaps more importantly, to feel the significance of Hester's pro-life action.

▪ George Eliot's *Adam Bede* addresses the pro-life issue of infanticide. Hetty Sorrel is accused of "a great crime — the murder of her child" (389).

▪ Clyde Griffiths in Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy* was well aware that in killing his lover, Roberta Alden, he would be responsible for "the death of that unborn child, too!!" (477). I think that Dreiser's punctuation was an extra signal to the reader. Why use that seemingly superfluous exclamation mark? Of course, the pro-life mind suggests that the exclamation marks represent Roberta and her unborn child.

▪ Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." As demonstrated in a recent University Faculty for Life news-letter, Hemingway does not favor an anti-life position in the story, as if abortion were a positive value in the rela-tionship between the man and the woman. The abortion is devastating to their relationship ("Biblio-

graphy" 3).

- John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* similarly depicts abortion as a factor which contributes substantially to the failed relationships not only between union activists Ben and Mary, but also assorted other characters.
- Richard Brautigan's *The Abortion: an Historical Romance 1966* is another text which does not ultimately seem favorable to abortion, since the confusion of the text replicates the confusion in the minds of the characters regarding whether the main character, Vida, should have the abortion.
- Walker Percy's Father Simon in *The Thanatos Syndrome* is a character with whom all pro-lifers can sympathize. Set in the future, the world of *The Thanatos Syndrome* has legalized abortion, infanticide (called "pedeuthanasia" at 333), and euthanasia. Maybe the best thing to do in such a world is to move beyond political action, beyond education, and, like the good priest given the appropriately-generic name, Smith, hole yourself up in a tower and wait. Waiting for what is the mystery of Percy's novel.

OUR OWN ADDITIONS TO THE CANON

Moreover, the pro-life canon can be constructed by additions from our own people.

I think immediately of Stephen Freind's narratives. Freind's *God's Children* is a fictionalized account of the passage of the Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act which can be a useful tool in the literature classroom. In one section of the novel, Freind has his main character, Kevin Murray, debate an anti-lifer. This section relies on ancient rhetorical redefinition to assist the reader in understanding how anti-life terminology has corrupted a language which formerly was pro-life. This passage illustrates a Marxist literary application of the struggle between a pro-lifer and an anti-lifer extremely well.

I was fortunate to discover another pro-life author here at this conference. Carl Winderl of Eastern Nazarene College is able not to compose, but to construct poems on the theme of the right to live. Besides its mastery of onomatopoeia, I think that "Dead in the Water" can be analyzed from the structuralist perspective quite well.

I remember when I presented Jean Blackwood's "Generation" before my fellow students in a Recent American Poetry course. I wanted to present "a pro-life poem" for this show-and-tell portion of our seminar, hoping to excite substantial discussion not only about the poem, but also the issue. Of course, except for one openly pro-life fellow student who advocated it, the poem was attacked as either being deaf to the concerns of women who wanted abortion or, in the opinion of the professor, not even "good poetry" after all. The poem aroused no anger. Despite the strong opinion of the professor, the supposed discussion which I had hoped would bring out the animal in all my fellow students never materialized.

Here is Blackwood's poem which did, however, "generate" silence:

> Is this the generation
> That Marched in Birmingham and Selma?
> That spoke for free speech in Berkeley?
> That sang of love in San Francisco?
> That swelled the Peace Corps ranks?
> Whose hearts responded when he cried,
> "I have a dream!"
> Is this the generation?
>
> Are these the flower children
> Who called for peace in Vietnam,
> For justice for the Indian nation,
> An end to hatred, prejudice, and war?
> Are these the flower children?
>
> Does it mean the freedom ride is over,

When the dream is half fulfilled and half forgotten?
When we trade songs for screams and love for violence,
Where does the ride take us now?

When we put away the agent orange
  to brandish prostoglandins (sic);
When scalpels replace the bayonette,
And People's Park has no children left to play in it...
Then, old friends,
You are indeed past thirty,
Not to be trusted again.
Guess I'll throw in my lot
With another generation. (12)

While it is beyond me that some in academia schizophrenically advocate certain humanitarian and animal rights causes yet ignore the first civil right to life, Blackwood's poem is a litany of questionings of an activist of the 1960s who sees through such schizophrenia. The persona looks at the paradigm presented by his or her own experience of rights and finds that it does not compare with current history; it contrasts.

I think this poem would most immediately benefit from a New Historicist approach. Our students, as is supposed to be typical of American students, may not be familiar with things which happened in ancient times — that is, thirty years ago. Certain elements of the poem's contrasts will need to be explained ("People's Park" and "agent orange" for example).

After settling these historical concerns, students may be made aware of the power of the pro-life message in the poem through a Marxist or a Cultural Criticism approach: the former to delineate the power structures operating in society now, and the latter to encourage questioning regarding why the deplorable situation of killing babies is tolerated when it contradicts civil rights.

Finally, the pro-life canon can be constructed by the emergence of a pro-life faculty. Let's see. If I finish Ph.D. coursework this summer, learn a foreign language in autumn, take comps in winter, then I'll be one of those ABDs and can get me a job at a college or university, teaching students about the glories of the pro-life perspective in, on, and through literature.

Seriously, though, just as the current crop of literature professors reached their positions carrying their anti-life baggage with them, so future professors of English — especially those who are pro-life — will have a chance to apply the archaeological method of pro-life work to literature. Such pro-life future professors need to be encouraged, certainly; more importantly, they need to be hired.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., premiere advocate of African-American signification in literature, recalls that he was once asked, quite seriously, "Tell me, sir, ... what *is* black literature?" As a partial response to that, Gates stated:

> It is a thing of wonder to behold the various ways in which our specialties have moved, if not from the margins to the center of the profession, at least from defensive postures to a generally accepted validity. (289)

We who are pro-life in the academy must ask and answer a similar question: what is a pro-life literature? The future of our students and the fate of our culture depend on our answer. If we in the humanities cannot find evidence for the pro-life viewpoint, then what justification can we provide that we are a people who have exercised freedom of choice and chose life?

Think of the analogy with legislative history and its importance in judicial decision-making. Often courts will not only refer, but defer to legislative histories created

while a law was progressing through a legislature. How much more important is it for us to emphasize the pro-lifeness of our literature?

I look forward to that time when a pro-life perspective on the canonical works will be as valid an approach as a feminist or a Marxist one. I look forward even more to the inclusion of what are now non-canonical works by our own poets and authors.

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