

# Danya p.

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Danya P. Ms. Q English 1302 April 2013 New Criticism and the Poem "When I Heard a Learn'd Astronomer" During the early half of the 20th century, a new style of criticism emerged allowing literary texts to be examined as "independent and complete works of art" as defined by Linda Pavlovski (1). It is evident that literary works were and still are interpreted with aid from historical, biological, and even cultural perspectives but New Criticism advocates each work of literary can stand with its own importance unaided. Critic, poet, and author of the book titled *The New Criticism*, John Crow Ransom, established New Criticism as the term which is used today. The majority of critics who use New Criticism use it to analyze and defend poetry from its common interpretations. A poem that can be analyzed by New Criticism is "When I Heard a Learn'd Astronomer" by Walt Whitman. The eight-lined poem recounts a day in class and a revelatory encounter with nature. Sticking to Pavlovski's definition of New Criticism and by focusing on a close reading of the technicalities such as structure, paradoxes, and word choice the message is clear to read. Jason Wilson claims "the structure of a story can relate its author and the ideological system" of the story itself (33). Evaluating the structure of "When I Heard a Learn'd Astronomer" this is demonstrated. The poem can be broken down into two sections splitting directly down the middle; the first four lines and the last four lines. These sections can be categorized just as Linda Wagner-Martin labeled two sections of the poem "Laying the Dust." She called the first section a "simple happening" while the latter is a result of the happening being called "from this experience, the poet concludes" (45). To begin the speaker of the poem describes the instruction he is receiving from the "learn'd astronomer"

simply and with minimal interest. The word "When" introducing the first line of every line in the first section unifies the idea of boredom the speaker has throughout that entire section. Parallel structure is applied while describing the learned astronomer's visual aids such as: the proofs, the figures, the charts, the diagrams and so on. This type of structure is used to lengthen the time of the lecture and quantify the amount of visual aids the learned astronomer has with him. Action words, as a result of the first half of the poem, are evident throughout the second section of the poem such as: the speaker rises, glides, wanders and so forth. The structure of the poem helps to present the message of knowledge comes by experience and initiative. Constant contrast are unmistakable in the poem convince the reader of the difference between the lecture and the evening with nature. Richard S. Calhoun describes paradoxes as the "central argument in poetry" (pars. 15). Reflecting back on the beginning of the poem the speaker states that he is being lectured by a learned astronomer. Calhoun's description is validated concerning the speaker who does not gain knowledge of astronomy from the learned astronomer. When describing the atmosphere of the speaker's learning environment Whitman states the learned astronomer lectured in the lecture-room. Other words such as "instruct" or even "teach" indicate the same as lecture but repetition, prolonging the moment, suggests the lecture's monotony. In the next line of the poem it states, "How soon unaccountable I became, " as a product of the lecture (line 5). The learning experience and how the speaker felt contrasts heavily with the atmosphere the speaker experienced being outdoors. Wagner-Martin states "silence can go beyond the effectiveness of sound" (56). Outdoors there was not a person

talking let alone lecturing but there was " perfect silence" (8). Lastly, the speaker sharply contrasts the description of the lecture-room to the outdoors. With all of the items mentioned with the lecturer, the lecture-room may be imagined cluttered or busy by the reader but the speaker outside in the primitive world signifies room and space. Throughout the poem, word choice is significant using denotation and connotation to fully understand the rationale behind why those words were chosen. Beginning with the title " When I Heard a Learn'd Astronomer, " the word " Heard" does not denote understanding or knowledge but merely as it is defined " to perceive by ear. " The next word in the title is " Learn'd. " A person who is learned indicates a highly educated person but the speaker uses slang or not the grammatically correct version of the word to describe someone as learned. Calhoun states " form and content are regarded as inseparable" by varying the word learned to " Learn'd" it changes the quality of knowledge from the " Learn'd Astronomer. " In the poem, during the lecture, the speaker becomes " tired and sick" (5). Although " tired" is commonly used to express someone who is over taken by boredom, the word " sick" illustrates the level of abhorrence the speaker was experiencing. After the speaker leaves the classroom, the tone of the poem shifts from dreadful to dreamy as he wanders off by himself in the " mystical" night air from " time to time" (7). Ending the poem, "Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars" implies the speaker is content and full of wisdom from just looking at the stars (8). Wagner-Martin suggests " silence surrounds the facts" and " it can permit people to truly know what they are seeing" (56). Once the speaker left the lecture-room and went outdoors, he became aware to all of the knowledge that was around him.

The advantage of New Criticism allows literary works to be analyzed separately without common influences so that readers can determine their own meaning of the literary work. A variety of view points catalyze new avenues that a literary work can advance into, showing this type of criticisms importance. In " When I Heard a Learn'd Astronomer, " the use of New Criticism truly permits the reader to get the true theme of the literary work, their own. Works Cited Calhoun, Richard S. " Formalistic Criticism." Critical Survey of Poetry. Ed. Frank N. Magill. Salem Press, 1992. 3973-3980. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter and Deborah A. Schmitt. Vol. 110. Detroit: Gale Research, 1999. Literature Resource Center. Web. 29 Mar. 2013. Kirszner, Laurie G., and Stephen R. Mandell, eds. Compact Learning: Reading, Reacting, Writing. 8th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2013. Print. " The New Criticism. " Introduction. Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism. Ed. Linda Pavlovski. Vol. 146. Detroit: Gale, 2004. 1-2. Literature Criticism Online. Web. 29 Mar. 2013. Wagner, Linda Welshimer. Denise Levertov. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Web. 29 Mar. 2013. Wilson, Jason. Claude Levi-Strauss. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Web. 31 Mar. 2013.