

**Toward an Integration of Compatible Critical Approaches:
A Study of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis***

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Abstract:

By focusing on Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), the present essay intends to show the shortcomings of single critical methods in adequately accounting for certain important features of a writerly text. Drawing on Althusser's notion of ideology, as discussed in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971), the essay first tries to shed light on the ideological framework of the story. In search of a better justification for Gregor's metamorphosis, it then turns to Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and dissent. Having examined the conscious nature of dissent in Gramsci, the argument is then led to examine the unconscious nature of the protagonist's dissatisfaction with the dominant ideology adopting a Freudian perspective. In the end, the growing apathy and final death of Gregor are discussed in the same context. The concluding note of the essay draws an analogy between practical criticism and interdisciplinary sciences aiming to show how different critical modes can be integrated to provide a more comprehensive account of a given work.

Keywords: Althusser, ideology, Gramsci, dissent, Freud, superego, death, interdisciplinary

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1. Introduction:

The self-explanatory title of Christopher Norris’s book *Against Relativism* summarily does away with the widespread misconception commonly attributed to the advent of deconstruction: relativism. In this book Norris sets before himself the task of rebutting “the idea of deconstruction as a priori committed to an extreme (‘textualist’) version of the argument that reality is a purely linguistic construct, that ‘all concepts are metaphors’, ‘all science merely a species of instrumental fiction’ and kindred quasi-deconstructive *idées reçues*” (Norris, 1997, p. 38). I have started the argument with Norris’s claim to put the reader’s mind at ease that even the most notoriously unwieldy modes of critical thinking (i.e., deconstruction), according to one of its renowned proponents, is not so relativistic as it may seem. Although I personally admit that *writerly* texts, like Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, are open to varying and, at times, opposing interpretations, at any single moment, one cannot help opting for one or a limited number of congruent sets of critical approaches to shed light on certain aspects of a given work. In other words, depending on where you choose to stand as a critic, you may find certain details in the work catering to your particular mode of reading or readings. More than any other consideration what really matters after that is a coherent manner of presentation employing the adopted strategies.

To facilitate his discussion of different critical approaches, Raman Selden in his *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, drawing on Roman Jakobson’s diagram of linguistic communication comes up with the following pattern:

Context
Writer > Writing > Reader
Code

Depending on which viewpoint you choose as a critic, you find yourself adopting a particular mode of critical analysis. If you are interested in the writer’s intension or feelings, you may be called a romantic critic, for instance. If you take greater interest in social or historical context in which the text emerged, you may be considered a Marxist critic. If writing *per se* is your focus of concern, then you are probably a formalist. If you opt for the codes and general rules for the production of textual meaning, you are likely to be called a structuralist. And finally if you consider how a reader receives a particular

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text, you are probably designated as a reader-oriented critic (Selden, 1997, pp. 4-5). However, can the classifications like the one we have now examined lighten the burden of the critic in studying different aspects of a work at the same time? Does this form of pigeonholing do justice to a well-rounded appreciation of a work? Can't some of the likely options form a symbiosis and be conducive to our greater appreciation of a work otherwise hardly attainable?

What I would like to deal with as part of our study in the present essay is the ideological context in which Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* was formed. In the first part of the study, the essay intends to delineate how Althusser's notion of ideology as expounded in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971) bear upon our understanding of the story. We then try to examine Gramsci's notion of hegemony in the context of the story. The attention is then turned to Freudian concepts of psychoanalysis to elucidate Gregor's relationship with his family, on one hand, and his society on the other. This part aims to show how Marxist notions can help us have a better understanding of Freudian approach and how the two approaches can be profitably integrated. The concluding part takes care of Gregor's tragic fate and the way it brings the plot to its denouement.

2. Background:

Let us start the first phase of our study with some definitions of the key term ideology. Marx's main argument regarding ideology is that "[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (Marx & Engels, 1977, p. 176). The ideas thus imposed by particular social groups on people indoctrinate certain set of values and norms which after a while take root and form a new framework of reference and impart a sense of order to people's experience of that. Terry Eagleton defines ideology as "those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power" (p.13). The word reproduction in Eagleton's definition has far-reaching repercussions. Louis Althusser (1918-1990) in his article entitled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" further explores the implications of the concept:

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the reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words'. (pp. 132-133)

Not only does the labor force guarantee the dominance of the ruling class by the production of commodities and the skills required for the maintenance of such a system, it also further solidifies its foundations by ingesting this ideology and knowingly or unknowingly promoting it.

Althusser makes a distinction between two different systems (or apparatuses) employed by the State to ensure its sovereignty: Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatus (RSA). The basic difference is that RSA exerts its pressure by violence while ISA resorts to ideology (p.145). However, these two systems cannot merely depend on repression or ideology for their sustenance. In order not to fall out of favor, the army and the police, for instance, should justify their presence through ideology so that people would not show resistance. ISA, on the other hand, can also secondarily employ violent measures in case ideology proves to be inadequate to make the subjects comply with the rules primarily dictated by ideology itself. If a student fails to go by the rulebook of the educational ideology, he will be kicked out of school. There are a number of ISA, as Althusser claims, among which those relevant to our discussion of Kafka are the family, legal and the cultural ISA (p. 143). Family and school are especially singled out by Althusser as the most important of all. In the pre-capitalist period the only dominant ISA was the church which, apart from its religious functions, had an important role in promoting the culture and education among people (p. 151). In the capitalist system, however, the church is superseded by the educational apparatus. So in the capitalist era “the School-Family couple has replaced the Church-Family couple” (p. 154).

Another important concept which Althusser introduces in his essay is *interpellation*. The word originally comes from the French word *appeller* meaning ‘to call’ or ‘to name’. Interpellation is then “the processes by which individuals internalize

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the cultural values, or ideologies, which are essential to the maintenance of the capitalist system” (Malpas, 2006, p. 207). The individual thus ‘hailed’ or ‘called upon’ by ideology is a subject. The process is not something that you can entirely preclude. Althusser says that “one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says ‘I am ideological’ (p. 175). He then goes on to claim that, as a matter of fact, “individuals are always-already interpellated as subjects” (p. 176). In other words, within the system of ideology we can never taste the flavor of *individuality* in the proper sense of the word!

One of the criticisms usually leveled at Althusser’s ideology is its deterministic quality (Bertens, 2001, p. 88). Although Althusser, as he himself admits, was inspired by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and his notion of hegemony, his ideology seems to be less flexible than Gramsci’s hegemony. Althusser, moreover, uses the term ideology in the context of capitalism while Gramsci uses hegemony with reference to the working class who can only “become the leading and the dominant [i.e., hegemonic] class to the extent it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances which allows it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State” (p. 320).

However, both Gramsci and Althusser seem to agree on the way the ruling class exerts its authority over its subjects. For Althusser ideology, more like Gramsci’s hegemony, functions primarily through consent; coercion is resorted to when the first mechanism has failed to bring about the desired result (i.e., the submission of the subjects). Gramsci and Althusser, nonetheless, are different in one important way: the question of dissent. Hans Bertens (2001) postulates that "Gramsci's hegemony, although it saturates society to the same extent as Althusser's ideology, is not airtight and waterproof. We can catch on it and resist its workings with counter hegemonic actions even if we can never completely escape its all-pervasive influence" (p. 88). Most critics, according to Eagleton, have considered Althusser's argument concerning ideology to be "seriously flawed". To him, Althusser seems to believe that "ideology is little more than an oppressive force which subjugates us, without allowing sufficient space for the reality of ideological struggle" (p. 150).

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After this relatively long introductory note it is now time to get down to our main business. The question now is what does it all have to do with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*? How can the argument above help us get a deeper insight into the story?

3. Results and Discussion:

The Metamorphosis clearly shows how ideology in the name of common sense governs the most private relationships of a family. Althusser in "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre" (1966) maintains that "[w]hat art makes us *see*, and therefore gives us in the form of '*seeing*', '*perceiving*' and '*feeling*' (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*" (Selden, 1988, p. 460).

One of the effects of the third person omniscient point of view in the story is that the reader's attention is directed to the feelings and thoughts of the story's "center of consciousness", i.e., Gregor. Gregor is a traveling salesman, a subject (or cog if you like) in the huge machinery of the capitalist system; a functional mercenary directly involved in promoting the cause of such a system. Naturally he is the one most susceptible to its adverse effects whether he likes that or not.

The story opens with a climactic sentence, an implausible situation: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka, 1993, p. 196). It is then continued with perfect realism and meticulous attention to details. So the reader begins by granting Gregor's story a "let's suppose", with a suspension of disbelief. The understated tone with which the story gets told from then on weighs on the reader's mind: Why has the writer treated the opening disconcerting event so lightly? The only reaction the event elicits from the protagonist is "What has happened to me?" (p. 196).

The Metamorphosis, as we are soon led to believe, is only a slight change in the long process of transformation which has already set in. In the context of the ideological discourse, Gregor can hardly call himself an individual in the strict sense of the word. His transformation can be deemed as the fictional rendering of the culmination of the process of dehumanization. Harold Bloom (1988), referring to Marx's ideas, maintains that the

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laborer's "work is external to the worker, i.e., it does not form part of his essential being so that instead of feeling well in his work, he feels unhappy, instead of developing free physical and mental energy, he abuses his body and ruins his mind" (p. 107). Gregor explicitly expresses his dissatisfaction with his job:

Oh, God, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Traveling about day in, day out. It's much more irritating work than doing the actual business in the office, and on top of that there's the trouble of constant traveling, of worrying about train connections, the bed and irregular meals, casual acquaintances that are always new and never become intimate friend. (Kafka, 1993, p. 197)

As we see, alienation characterizes Gregor's relationship even before his actual alienation after metamorphosis. Locking doors both when he is at home or away, is a "prudent habit" he has developed because of the nature of his job. For Kafka, how ideology holds sway over Gregor's relationship with others is more important than the kind of insect he has turned into. When the publisher of the story first submitted to Kafka a sketch of the title page of the story which showed Gregor as a beetle, Kafka rejected the sketch: "the insect proper cannot be designed. Not even from far away is it possible to disclose its shape" (qtd. In Politzer, 1966, p. 81). As a substitute he suggested a drawing of the parents and the sister in the lamplit room, with the door of Gregor's room wide open. It seems that the insect is meant to symbolize Gregor's pre-existing feeling of insignificance. The insignificance of the central character in Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle* has been conveyed by spelling only the first letter of the protagonist's name, Mr K., which is an obvious reference to the author's name.

Despite his physical change, Gregor exactly thinks and feels like a human being. So the story does not deny the reader access to Gregor's mind in its human state which is evidently the product of a capitalist system. However, the mind, despite retaining most of its former qualities, has started to undergo an inevitable change. One's mind (i.e., psyche) and soma (i.e., body) are so inextricably linked to each other that any change in one can affect the other in important ways. This is when the second implication of metamorphosis makes its presence felt. Before the change, Gregor was a dutiful subject of the capitalist system. It was the ideology which defined what his responsibility was and what he was

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expected to do. Having internalized the demands of an ideological system, the subject behaves accordingly. "The individual in question," Althusser (1971) argues, "behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which 'depend' the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject" (p. 167). The subject's conscience, as in Gregor's case, is formed based on these 'common sensical' notions of right and wrong. Duty and conscience then take on a quasi-religious quality and if the subject, even inadvertently, fails to live up to their requirements, he is bound to feel the pangs of a guilty conscience. Complying with them, on the other hand, confers a feeling of pride and satisfaction. In the first section of the story after Gregor finally manages to open the door, he is the only one who can retain his composure. Addressing the chief clerk who is evidently the spokesman of ideology, Gregor says, "You see, sir, I am not obstinate, and I am willing to work; traveling is a hard life, but I couldn't live without it" (Kafka, 1993, p. 205). He then continues, "I'm loyally bound to serve the chief, you know that very well. Besides, I have to provide for parents and my sister" (p. 205). Later, in section II, remembering the past, Gregor gives voice to his feeling of pride: " 'What a quiet life our family has been leading,' said Gregor to himself, and as he sat there motionless staring into the darkness he felt great pride in the fact that he had been able to provide such a life for his parents and sister in such a fine flat" (p. 208).

Gregor's metamorphosis can be interpreted as a "passive resistance" against the ruling ideology. By passive resistance I do not mean consciously adopting certain non-violent measures aiming to warn the ruling body of a lurking threat. I am not talking about Mahatma Gandhi's Protest Movement; I am not talking about David Thoreau's Civil Disobedience. They knew full well how 'to hit the right nail on the head'. This is more or less what we see in Gramsci's concept of dissent that we already referred to. People in the context of hegemonic order, though mostly guided by consent, can consciously oppose the system; the subalterns have their own "demands" and "aspirations" to be attended to (Jones, 2006, pp. 47-48). However, in Gregor's case, although he knows what he dislikes, he hardly knows what he really likes. It seems that Gramsci's notion of dissent cannot fully account for the nature of Gregor's resistance. This, I suppose, is where Freud should step in and solve the problem.

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Eagleton (1996) designates four areas of interest in psychological criticism. This approach can deal with author of the work; its contents; its formal construction or the reader (p. 155). The focus of concern in this study is primarily on the content and the mentality of the central character of the story. Freud's main objective was to come up with a structural pattern of man's psyche in general; however, many of his contemporary writers intentionally modeled their characters on their relationships based on his suggested pattern. Snyder (1981) believes that "Kafka certainly acknowledged Freud's fundamental humanism as well as his monumental contribution to man's understanding of human behavior" (p. 124). Consciously or unconsciously, Kafka has included traces of Freud in his story and Freudian patterns can be justifiably employed to explain Gregor's behavior and fate.

Viewed from the Freudian perspective, Gregor's metamorphosis can be interpreted as denouncing the requirements of the capitalist society to enjoy unrestrainedly in what the libidinal state has to offer. Kafka in his story has masterfully juxtaposed two worlds: the world of reality and the world of dream. His artistic amalgamation of the two worlds can be considered as a prototype of what later came to be termed as magic realism. In *The Metamorphosis*, the inauspicious pairing of the two decides the tragic fate of the protagonist.

Gregor is being driven by two opposing forces: superego and id. Superego is "the internalized environment, tradition, culture, and *mores* – and which is, as far as the individual is concerned, the acquired part of the human personality" (Zilboorg, p. 31). This aspect of man's psyche is responsible for man's 'sound' behavior in the family as well as the society. Freud in his "The Anatomy of the Mental Personality" says that superego is "the representative of all moral restrictions, the advocate of the impulse toward perfection, in short it is as much as we have been able to apprehend psychologically of what people call the 'higher' things in human life" (p. 95).

Superego affects one's behavior in two different ways: it acts "directly or through the ego" (Guerin, 2005, p. 158). In either case it has a restricting or inhibiting function to ward off the drives of the id considered as unacceptable by society or/and religion (Zilboorg, p. 33). It operates as a built-in regulating mechanism and it is for the most part unconscious. Gregor is driven by both the internalized superego (i.e., conscience) and the

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external force (i.e., the capitalist society). The filial obligations felt by Gregor toward his sister and parents stems from the inner impulse. The chief clerk on the other hand is the spokesman of the external obligation. The inner obligation bears strong affinities to the internalized ideology and the outer force is, in similar fashion, tantamount to the Repressive Apparatus (RA) discussed earlier.

As well as being a symbol of the dehumanizing effect of the capitalist society, Gregor's 'insecthood' can be regarded as his impulsive drive to embrace his id in opposition to oppressive demands of the superego. In this way Gregor manages to turn a deaf ear to the obligations heaped on him by the system. In the first part of the story just before Gregor opens the door his abdication of responsibilities is justified in this way:

He meant actually to open the door, actually to show himself and speak to the chief clerk; he was eager to find out what the others, would say at the sight of him. If they were horrified then the responsibility was no longer his and he could stay quiet. But if they took it calmly, then he had no reason either to be upset, and could really get to the station for the eight o'clock train if he hurried. (Kafka, 1993, p. 203)

Gregor tries to reclaim his power as an individual at the cost of giving up his duties as a 'civilized' member of the society. To Freud, one of the problems imposed on man in the context of a "civilized" society is "a loss of happiness through the heightening of a sense of guilt" (Freud, 1930, p. 81).

In *The Metamorphosis* dissent cannot be fully accounted for by Althusserian ideology and Gramscian hegemony. The unconscious nature of the event can better be explained by the Freudian approach. In his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1930) maintains that "[t]he development of the individual seems to us to be a product of the interaction between two urges, the urge towards happiness, which we usually call 'egoistic', and the urge towards union with others in the community, which we call 'altruistic' (p. 87). In the context of the capitalist society, however, what decides what is right and what is wrong is the dominant ideology. The 'altruistic' concern which Gregor's sister shows in the first section of the story gradually wears off, as she, like the mother and the father, decides to be more directly involved in the capitalist system.

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Familial ties and ‘altruistic’ concerns for Gregor are overshadowed by materialistic concerns. The alienation is then in direct proportion to the extent one is really involved in the system. To cater to his own ‘egoistic’ urge, Gregor is the first one to distance himself from others. The same metamorphosis can also be diagnosed in the behavior of the other members of the family. It seems the more a person lets himself or herself be exposed to the devastating demands of the system, the more he or she tends to be consciously or unconsciously willing to indulge in his or her id. However, the most private ‘egoistic’ urges do not remain unaffected by the dominant ideology.

To see how the capitalist ideology affects the nature of the subject’s instinctual drives let’s take the picture of the lady in fur on the wall of Gregor’s room. It is first in the opening part of the story where we are told: “Above the table ... hung a picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a pretty gilt frame. It showed a lady, with a fur cap on a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished!” (Kafka, 1993, p. 196). The picture can be related to our discussion in several important ways. The picture, in the first place, as R. K. Angress (1970) admits, is “an erotic object of sorts to the hero” (p. 746). So it can be considered as a token of Gregor’s tendency to escape the oppressive demands of a system of superego and to respond positively to his neglected sexual drives. The picture, however, bears unmistakable traces of the system of which Gregor is a ‘malcontent’ agent: the fashion magazine, the “gilt frame”, the “fur cap” and the “fur stole” are all footprints of such a system. Among its multifarious implications one can also refer to the dehumanizing influence of capitalism. The ambivalent nature of fur symbolism also points to animalistic nature of man’s libidinous drives. Secondly, the picture is always a picture, pointing to and promising satisfaction without ever being able to do so. It is an “imitation of reality”; it can be considered as a substitute and hence defective copy of the original. The same picture is once more referred to in section two when Gregor’s sister has decided to move the furniture to give him “as wide a field as possible to crawl.” However, this was not exactly what Gregor wanted. The answer to the following rhetorical question is surely in the negative: “Did he really want his warm room, so comfortably fitted with old family furniture, to be purged into a naked den in which he would certainly be able to crawl unhampered in all directions but at the price of shedding simultaneously all recollections of his human background?” (p. 216). From

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among the objects his sister and his mother have decided to remove, Gregor finally decides to guard the lady's picture: "... he really did not know what to rescue first, then on the wall opposite, which was already otherwise cleared, he was struck by the picture of the lady muffled in so much fur and quickly crawled up to it and pressed himself to the glass, which was a good surface to hold onto and comforted his belly" (p. 217). In discussing the significance of the picture Politzer (1966) maintains that Gregor's "hidden desires have taken refuge in his affection for this print, although the reproduction reveals in its vulgarity how deeply the standardization and commercialization of modern life have penetrated the bachelor's unconscious. For the insect, the print becomes the one of his possessions to which he is determined to adhere both physically and mentally" (p. 72). By revealing the picture behind, the transparent glass both stimulates and hinders Gregor: "The fulfillment and frustration of love are rendered here by convincing paradox" (p. 72).

As time goes by the libidinal state of Gregor's life does not prove to be a happy one. It turns out to be even more frustrating in his being further alienated from others without being able to enjoy his new way of life. The estrangement is intensified in the third section when the parents and the sister are practically involved in the process of production: "Who could find time, in this overworked and tired-out family to bother about Gregor more than was absolutely needful?" (Kafka, 1993, p. 221). What Gregor did in the past to provide for the financial needs of the family is now being done by others; therefore, the sense of duty and morality which formerly related Gregor to his family gradually melts away. The ideology has ceased to interpellate him as a traveling salesman and his exemption does not give him the expected pleasant feeling.

The third section of the story can truly represent Gregor's metamorphosis; his 'reification' and relegation to the state of 'thinghood'. The person who first verbalizes this, at least up to then, unmentionable reality is his sister Grete: "My dear parents ... things can't go on like this. Perhaps you don't realize that, but I do. I won't utter my brother's name in the presence of this creature, and so all I say is: we must get rid of it" (p. 227). After receiving the fatal blow from his God-like father, Gregor whose punishment now reminds one of Adam's is ready to embrace his death:

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The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister, if that were possible. In this state of vacant and peaceful meditation he remained until the tower clock struck three in the morning. The first broadening of light in the world outside the window entered in his consciousness once more. Then his head sink to the floor of its own accord and from his nostrils came the last flicker of his breath. (p. 229)

Gregor's willingness to die can also find its justification in Freud's later works. In his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud explored the possibility of a universal drive towards death. Although this drive seems to be in contrast to Eros (the pleasure principle), it has more or less the same purpose, i.e. release from tension. Freud (1920) refers to that as "*an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things*" (original italics, p. 30). Death is apparently the only remaining solution to Gregor's dilemma of freedom in his insect state or submission to requirements of the capitalist society. The implied irony seems to be that one cannot live beyond the limits "always-already" defined by ideology.

4. Conclusion:

As we can see in analyzing a story any single critical approach may not always seem adequate to highlight enough details to enable the critic to explain significant details in a given work. To come up with a *grand* critical approach to "sufficiently" account for a literary work is an insurmountable task which can never come true. Sticking to any one existing method, on the other hand, at its best is unnecessarily restricting. Pigeonholing approaches and discussing them in different chapters of books on critical theories does not do justice to the concept of 'democratic mode of thinking'. The dynamic and esemplastic nature of the mind does not always find the idea of compartmentalization accommodating. It should be left to the discretion and taste of the critic to see how he wants to integrate different methods to come up with a more comprehensive and customized understanding of the work.

Interdisciplinary fields in the realm of science have cut across the traditional boundaries and have enhanced their potentials in dealing with problems. Quantum

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Information Processing, for instance, draws on the potentials of quantum physics and computer science; Bioinformatics combines molecular biology with information technology. Interdisciplinary approaches in the realm of science usually focus on problems that seem to be too vast or complicated for a single discipline to tackle. If different fields were once separated for the sake of convenience, isn't it now the time to seek further convenience in their joint effort to unravel complicated problems? If science can reap the benefit of the "marriage of true minds", why shouldn't that be the case in the realm of literary criticism?


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