

Abrams right or wrong

by donalee Moulton

The last fifteen years has been a time of diverse and continuous literary criticism. M.H. Abrams refers to this as the new, new criticism and classified it as a "bewildering variety".

Abrams, the M.H. so familiar to English students, is of a time before this. To him there is a method of interpretation which tends to validate or invalidate. He is unlike this generation of "deconstructive criticism" which purports that "There are no correct readings, neither are there misreadings."

He feels there is a particular meaning which can be adjudged to be the right meaning. Every act of reading is not a misreading.

According to Abrams, "The poet is a man writing for men." All the older poets meant something determinate which they felt competent men could comprehend. There may be a substantial degree of variance on an interpretation but there is a core of meaning, intended by the poet, which can be arrived at. And in the understanding of literary works, this is vital. Not every response is equally legitimate, as critics of this new age contend.

Abrams' lecture focused on a Wordsworthian poem and two popular interpretations which surround it. In deciding which is correct, "the criteria is to provide rational judgements."

There are a number of devices which enable one to decide upon the 'rightness' of an interpretation. Past works by the poet, the grammar of the poem, the external world, views held by the poet, are all clues—a basis on which to build evidence for or against a particular interpretation.

What one ultimately must look for is the maximum of highest yield—that interpretation which provides the best meaning / enjoyment for the reader and does the poet the greatest justice.

In the case of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal", Abrams is certain that 'She' refers to a real flesh and blood lady and not a feminine abstraction of soul. Certain, in the literary sense, because "The language game cannot yield the same kind of certainty as math or the physical sciences."

To what does 'She' refer? Abrams is sure 'She' is a lady—maybe Lucy of the preceding Lucy poems, but he is also sure that the other interpretation will continue to exist. There are no definites in this field, "we hit finally the bedrock; we can go no further." Then it becomes a matter of choice—choice determined by literary criteria and



M.H. Abrams speaking on the new, new criticism

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justification of what is a valid interpretation.

The new, new criticism gives no yes or no answers, no rights or wrongs, but what is worse is that this approach feels this to be O.K. To Abrams the interest should be in readings, not misreadings, or in misreadings only as something to be corrected.

A highly entertaining lecturer, Abrams is more than interesting. He is coherent. The one flaw is he's wrong. 'She' is the antecedent pronoun referring to soul.

"A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not
feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal
course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

—Wordsworth

'PREPARING'

by Trish Aikens

It was a cold and blowy Tuesday afternoon but despite the weather, the tiny studio one of the Arts Centre was filled with students sitting in chairs or crouched on the floor. They were awaiting the beginning of Beverly Simons' one act play PREPARING, the second in a series of plays being put on as a part of Noon Hour Theatre at Dal.

The stage was set in total blackness, the lighting subdued, and the props simple. At centre stage, a flight of stairs leading up to a platform, at left a table and a large upright board, to the right similar props plus a stand with a man's profile perched on top and at left front a wedge shaped platform beside which was an inflatable chair. At different locations on the stage were various clothing props—a red coat (later to represent youth), a large white sweater (to represent marriage), a black vest and belt (to represent independence) and a brown shawl (to represent old age)—all of which were used throughout the course of the play.

Ferne Downey plays Jeannie in this monologue which is largely a

combination of Jeannie's lifetime recollections: her high school graduation, her marriage, the birth of her first child, the suicide of her youngest son, her divorce, the death of her husband, and the work she has done with regard to the restoration of old and historic properties. It has not been a particularly happy lifetime, or so it seems, for this now old woman. But her character is such that it is difficult to say just exactly what her life has been like. Jeannie is a very deep person and because she is constantly jumping from memory to memory, one gets the impression that maybe she is just a bit senile, perhaps even on the verge of insanity.

The play was difficult to follow and to understand. What was Jeannie preparing for? "Death? Change? Maturation? Vision?" Maybe she was merely preparing for an evening with her parents at a restaurant, or was that another recollection? The difficulty to distinguish between past and present was, to say the least, irritating. Perhaps a second viewing is necessary in order to appreciate the full value of PREPARING.