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This narratological account of eight major American novels project: to introduce the primary characteristics of narrative theory, as practised by such structuralist thinkers as Gérard Genette, Mikhail Bakhtin, Wolfgang Iser, Paul Ricoeur, and Roland Barthes (this list is not exhaustive), and to provide exemplary readings which demonstrate the analytical uses to which the theory may be put. The resulting negotiations between text and theory are seen in relation to The Great Gatsby, The Sound and the Fury, The Sun Also Rises, A Lost Lady, The Portrait of a Lady, The House of Mirth, Huckleberry Finn, and Their Eyes Were Watching God. There is here an implicit chronological limitation at work which produces a largely unvoiced appeal to the idea of modernism: an idea which would seem to set into play a whole range of assumptions that work with the theoretical assumptions explored. Yet one of the achievements of this book is the impression of diversity which it produces both among the texts with which it deals and within the structuralist orthodoxy which provides the controlling principles.

New Readings of the American Novel is, as its subtitle makes clear, motivated by a pedagogical rationale. The discussion is directed at students of critical theory and their teachers, both of whom will find very useful these model applications of theory to familiar texts. This worthwhile project is qualified, though, by the admission, made early on, that a certain selectivity is in operation here. Only aspects of each theory are explored according to their relevance to the text under discussion. It must be assumed, then, that the text somehow determines the appropriateness of the analytical tools applied to it. There is a circularity to this logic which seems to arise from a profound unwillingness to surrender the primacy of the text, a resistance which is at odds with the book's ostensibly structuralist reasoning.

This ambivalence, this less than complete commitment to structuralist theory, is most clearly perceptible in the book's attempt to redefine narrative theory in such a way as to challenge the concept of the American canon. In response to the common complaint that structuralism is a formalism that ignores, at its peril, the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of the text, Peter Messent sets himself the task of using structuralist methods to produce an image of the text as a reflection of American heterogeneity. Placed at the end of a lengthy study of the major novels of the modern American canon, this attempt is certainly presented as ambitious. But is it really? Messent takes as his marginalized or non-canonical narrative Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, a classic text of the Harlem Renaissance and a staple of academic courses on twentieth-century Afro-American writing. Here again, the pedagogical conception of the book betrays its analytical force. For without the necessity to appeal to practical classroom situations, Messent could have provided us with a really searching critique of canonicity. Undoubtedly he possesses the learning, the intelligence, and the argumentative skill required to theorize in this way. As it is, the immense potential of this book is compromised by the need to adapt theory to the constraints imposed by pedagogy. New Readings of the American Novel will prove valuable in the classroom for its highly readable and informative presentation of narratological theory and practice which is also, importantly, affordable (at least in the paperback edition).

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