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The Woman of Colour in Context: Concerning New Criticism in the Contemporary Classroom

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Title: *The Woman of Colour* in Context: Concerning New Criticism in the Contemporary Classroom

The lasting effects of New Criticism and formalism have had a profound effect on American Literary education. This dogmatic ideology, founded by Southern Agrarians out of Vanderbilt University in the early 20th century, inherently seeks to depoliticize texts by removing them from their historical and cultural contexts in order to treat the text as an autonomous, self-referential entity. While close reading can be a helpful tool for students, it is not a comprehensive methodology and can produce skewed perceptions of cultural works. In order to demonstrate the shortcomings of New Criticism, this essay centers around *The Woman of Colour: A Tale*, published anonymously in 1808. The novel is written in response to the political landscape of the long eighteenth century as well as colonial Britain's constructions of race and gender—it is therefore imperative that the novel be examined through a comprehensive cultural understanding of the time. The novel's epistolary form offers a rare glimpse into the personal musings of a mixed race protagonist, Olivia, the child of a slave owner and one of his slaves. Institutional colorism in Britain and its colonies made Olivia, in her words, something of a "general curiosity," and her narrative is steeped in social anxiety over status (83). These anxieties, while common to the long eighteenth century, are exemplified by her subjected status as a person of color; however the nuances of her position would be lost without a historical or cultural lens. To fully explain the necessity for a more comprehensive methodology, this essay provides an overview of the founding of New Criticism, an introduction to the primary text, and an experiment in applying New Criticism to the text. Most importantly, it places the work in its necessary cultural context to demonstrate the shortcomings of treating a novel as a self-referential aesthetic entity.