

Literary Criticism

An Introduction

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What is Literary Criticism?

- A critic is the ideal reader who subjects the text to close scrutiny
- Cecil Day Lewis said in *The Poetic Image*: “The critic has one pre-eminent task: the task of easing or widening or deepening our response to poetry”
- The word “critic” derived from the Greek word “crites”, meaning “to judge”
 - The critic as judge: The capacity to recognise the good and reject what is worthless
 - The critic as interpreter: The critical appraisal and elucidation of works (*Apology for Poetry, Of Dramatic Poesy, Preface to the Fables or On Translating the Poets, Preface to Shakespeare, Coleridge’s Lectures on Shakespeare, The Study of Poetry*)
 - The critic as generaliser: The critic should formulate common principles of writing (*Poetics, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Hazlitt’s “Of Poetry in General”, TS Eliot’s Tradition and the Individual Talent, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, What is a Classic*)
 - The critic as scholar: Consolidating historical knowledge (*Helen Gardner’s Profession of a Critic, Tillyard’s The Elizabethan World Picture, JL Lowes’ The Road to Xanadu*)

Criticism and Theory

- Aijaz Ahmad's In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (1992)
- Criticism
 - Studies concerned with defining, classifying analyzing, interpreting and evaluating works of literature (MH Abrams)
 - Belongs to liberal humanist tradition (which itself is an antonym to theory)
- Literary Theory
 - Different frameworks used to evaluate and interpret a particular work
 - Guides those who criticize literary works

Three Broad Areas

- Legislative Criticism
 - Lays down the rules of the art of writing
 - For e.g., Elizabethan criticism
- Aesthetic Criticism
 - Treats literature as an art, an independent activity of the mind
 - For e.g., Sidney, Dryden, Addison, Coleridge, Pater, Wilde, IA Richards
- Descriptive Criticism
 - Study of individual works and writers: aims, methods, effects
 - For e.g., Jonson's Conversations with Drummond, Dryden, and much of English criticism

Classical and Romantic

- These are not water-tight compartments
- Classicism and Romanticism are both humanistic ideologies
- Classical
 - Everything that belonged to the Greco-Roman classicism
 - Term used to distinguish between Greco-Roman art and neo-classicist imitations
 - To describe works that embody the Greek spirit (self-contained unity, perfect proportion of parts)
- Romanticism
 - Rejection of rules
 - Individualism and Subjectivity (human being as unique)
 - The particular, not the general (Blake said: He who generalises is an idiot”
 - Sensibility or passionate feeling
 - Idealization of medievalism

Beginnings

- Earliest critics were poets
 - Their work was intuitive and unsystematic, moralistic and formalistic; they analysed society and art
 - Sanskrit critical tradition began with Rig veda (12th century BC)
 - Dravidian critical tradition began with Tolkappiam (5th c BC)
 - Western tradition began with Homer (8th c BC), Pindar (5th c BC) Aristophanes' play The Frogs (5th c BC)

Classical Period

- Started in the classical period, in the 4th century BC
- Literary-critical discussions occurred in plays
- Classical Greece—Plato’s indictment of poetry and Aristotle’s ethical defence
- Rome—Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian—focus on technical aspects and advice to rhetoricians
- “Longinus” subverted the classical principle of restraining the passions
- Neo-Platonism: Plotinus, Macrobius, Boethius

Medieval Period: Introduction

- Christianity & its varying relation to classicism—preserved classical thought, and also had an anti-pagan distrust
- St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas
- Revival of Neo-Platonism
- Ancient universities
- Seven liberal arts divided into
 - Trivium (three roads)—grammar, rhetoric, logic
 - Quadrivium (four roads)—arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy

Medieval Critical Traditions

- Grammatical
- Exegesis (critical commentary)
- Accesus (introduction to authors)
- Scholasticism (focus on legal, logical, and rationalistic issues at the expense of genuine moral and ethical problems). Humanism was against this. Scholasticism was influenced by Islamic philosophers like Averroes and Avicenna.
- Allegory (Dante)
- Humanistic currents starting from Dante (De Vulgari Eloquentia), Boccaccio, Christine de Pisan

Renaissance (Early Modern Period)

- Humanism & the Classics
- Translation
- The Clergy and the Scriptures, Reformation
- Chief notions: Imitation, didactic function, classical unities, verisimilitude, vernacular, poetic genres, use of rhyme, poetry in relation to moral philosophy and history
- Lodovico Castelvetro, Torquato Tasso, Philip Sidney, George Gascoigne, George Puttenham

Neoclassical Period

- French Neoclassicists: Corneille, Boileau
- Imitation and Nature
- Influence of Newtonian physics
- Order, clarity, standardization
- Regulation of the use of language and words
- English Neoclassicists: Dryden, Pope, Addison, Aphra Behn, Johnson

The Enlightenment

- Philosophical movement of the age of reason
- Heterogeneous thinkers: Kant, Hegel, Voltaire, Diderot, Locke, Addison, Burke, Wollstonecraft
- Precursors: Bacon (empiricist), Descartes (rationalist), Spinoza
- Challenged by
 - Jean Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, Adorno and Horkheimer, Marx and Engels, Barthes
- Criticism centred on
 - Language (Lockean empiricism led to sensory detail, scientific description, and a literal, denotative, clear language)
 - Taste and Imagination, Education and Progress

Romanticism

- French Revolution & Napoleonic Era
- Revolutions of 1848
- Industrial Revolution
- Practice and theory intertwined
- Romanticism in Germany: Schiller, Schleiermacher, Schlegel
- France: Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Sainte-Beuve
- England (different varieties):
 - Thomas Gray, Oliver Goldsmith, Robert Burns, William Blake
 - Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats
- America: Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Hawthorne

Realism & Naturalism

- Rise of the imperialism
- Industrial Revolution accelerated
- Industrial working class challenged the bourgeoisie
- France: painter Gustave Courbet, Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal, Maupassant, Emile Zola
- England: Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy
- America: William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Henry James, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane

Symbolism & Aestheticism

- Jean Moreas' manifesto
- Arthur Symons
- France: Baudelaire, Mallarme, Verlaine, Valery
- L'art pour l'art: Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde (against Art for Life' Sake of Arnold and Ruskin)

Other 19th Century Thinkers

- Critics of Bourgeoisie: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson
- Economic liberalism: Adam Smith (laissez-faire), David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus
- Utilitarianism: Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, JS Mill
- Anarchists: William Godwin, Charles Baudelaire
- Victorians: Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, Arnold

Formalisms

- Russian Formalists
 - Viktor Shklovsky
 - Boris Eichenbaum
 - Roman Jakobson
 - Mikhail Bakhtin
- New Critics
 - Cambridge Practical critics (IA Richards, FR Leavis, William Empson)
 - JC Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Allan Tate, RP Warren
 - Wimsatt & Beardsley
 - Chicago School (Neo-Aristotelians: RS Crane, Elder Olson, Richard McKeon, Wayne C Booth)
- Associated schools: Modernism, Myth Criticism

Different Kinds of Criticism

- Biographical Criticism: Analyzes a writer's biography to show the relationship between the author's life and their works of literature. New Critics disapproved of this approach and advocated “biographical fallacy”
- Comparative Criticism: Comparison of texts and cultural practices in other locations. This is against hegemony of certain kinds of literature. Began with Dryden.
- Ethical Criticism: Inclusion of the ethical component in interpretation. Discusses Autonomy vs Morality. Unlike ethical criticism, moral criticism only judges a work as good or bad.
- Expressive Criticism: A literary work is seen as the expression or overflow of the author’s vision, ideology, mental state or social context. Related and psychological and mimetic criticism.
- Feminist Criticism: How literature enforces economic, political, social and psychological marginalisation and oppression of women
- Historical Criticism: Focuses on the context of literary production / reception, or then world behind the text. Related is New Historicism.
- Mimetic Criticism: Based on the idea that the text is an imitation of reality, both (i) literature as reflective of the world, and (ii) literature as imitative of literary and cultural models.

Different Kinds of Criticism

- Pragmatic Criticism: Understands the social function of art in addressing / shaping the needs of the audience, and studies the ethical impact of a text on the audience. For e.g., Plato, Charles Sanders Peirce
- Psychological Criticism: To analyse the unconscious elements of a literary text, author or reader
- Social Criticism: How a literary text reflects social, political and economic issues
- Textual Criticism: Focuses on textual variants and manuscripts
- Formalist Criticism: Studies a text as only a text, considering its features, such as rhymes, cadences, and literary devices, in an isolated way, not attempting to apply their own opinion as to what the text means
- Theoretical Criticism: Focus on ideas and their coherence, and their meanings involved in texts; correlation to reality, purpose
- Mythological Criticism: Studies recurrent universal patterns underlying literary works