

A Short Introduction to Literary Criticism

Saeed Farzaneh Fard

Department of Persian Language and Literature, Sarab Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sarab,
Iran

Abstract

The field of literary criticism these days has tensions. For some scholars, the sheer enjoyment of reading books and the pleasures of personal response to books can be ruined by literary criticism. We don't like people who don't like what we do. Of course, or who make us feel that the books we love are somehow inferior. And we aren't fond of those who seek to bully us into believing that what we got out of a favorite novel or poem was somehow "wrong" and that they know what it "really means". Or we may feel some literary theories are so obscure they leave us scratching our heads in bewilderment. We have some stereotypes about these kinds of literary critics, including the cartoon image of the teacher who so overanalyzes a work that our pleasure is snuffed out.

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1. Introduction

For centuries literary criticism was considered as an art of writing poetry; it was an advice to the poet rather than the reader. Literary criticism has been applied since the seventeenth century to the description, justification, analysis, or judgments of works arts. Criticism in modern times is classified in different ways. M.H. Abrams in **The Mirror and the Lamp** talks about four different critical theories: When the critic views art in terms of the universe or what is imitated, he is using the **mimetic theory**. When the emphasis is shifted to the reader, and the critic views art in terms of its effect on the audience, he is using a **pragmatic theory** that was dominant up to the end of the eighteenth century. But in the nineteenth century the emphasis shifted to the poet, and poetry became ‘a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling’ of the poet. In this case a work of art is essentially the internal made external. Therefore, when a critic views art in terms of the artist, he is using the **expressive theory**. In the 20th century, the emphasis shifted to the work of art, especially under the influence of the **New Criticism**. When the critic views art basically in its own terms, seeing the work as a self-contained entity, he is using the **objective theory**.

Some critics have talked about theoretical and practical or applied criticism. **Theoretical criticism** attempts to arrive at the general principles of art. **Practical criticism** applies these principles to the works of art. Literary critics have also talked about other types of criticism: **Historical criticism** examines a work of art against its historical background and the author’s life and time. **Impressionistic criticism** emphasizes the way that a work of art affects the critic. **Textual criticism** applies scholarly means to a work of art to reconstruct its original version. **Analytical criticism** tries to get at the nature of a work of art as an object through the detailed analysis of its parts and their organization. **Judicial criticism** judges a work of art by a definable set of standards. **Moral criticism** evaluates a work of art in relation to human life. **Mythic criticism** explores the nature and significance of the archetypes and archetypal patterns in a work of art.

2. History of Literary Criticism

Literary criticism begins with the Greeks, but little of their work has survived. Aristotle’s **Poetics** is mostly devoted to drama; and Plato’s theories of literature are scarcely literary criticism. From the Romans the major works are Horace’s **Ars Poetica** and the works on rhetoric composed by Cicero and Quintilian. The first important critical essay in the Christian era is Louginus’s **On His Sublime**, and the first medieval critic of note was Dante who, in his **De Vulgari Eloquentic**, addressed himself to the problems of language appropriate to poetry.

The Renaissance writers and critics for the most part followed the Classical rules on the principle that the ancients were bound to have been right; but there were some attempts at originality. For example, Vida’s **Poetica** (1527), a treatise on the art of poetry; du Bellay’s **Deffense et Zllustration** (1549); and Lope de Vega’s **New Art of Making Comedies** (1609). In England there is little criticism of note until Puttenham’s **The Art of English Poeise** (1589) and Sidney’s **Apologie for poetrie** (1595), which is important because it is a detailed examination of the art of poetry and a discussion of the state of English poetry at the time.

For nearly a hundred years the major critical works to appear tended to reinforce the classical tradition and rules. Some of the main works were Ben Jonson's **Timber; or Discoveries** (1640), Pierre Corneille's **Discours** (1660) and Boileau's **L'Art Poétique** (1673). With Dryden, however, in his **Essay of Dramatic Poesy** (1668) – not to mention his prefaces, dedications and open-mindedness whose critical essays are works of art in themselves. He, if anybody, showed the way to the people function of criticism.

In the 18th c. G.B.Vico, the Italian critic and philosopher, was the pioneer of the historical approach to literature. Historicism, as it is called, completely changed, in the long run, critical methods. It enabled people to realize that the rules that held good for the Classical writers do not necessarily hold good in a later age, and that there were not absolute principles and rules by which literature could be judged (which was Dr. Johnson's point of view).

There was thus a reaction against Neoclassicism, an increasing interest in literatures other than those of Greece and Rome, and a greater variety of opinions about literature, about the language to be used, and about the creative and imaginative faculties and processes of the writer. The new views found expression in Wordsworth's Preface to the Second Edition of the **Lyrical Ballads** (1800), Coleridge's **Biographia Literaria** (1817), Shelley's **Defense of Poetry** (1820) – a reply to Peacock's ironical debunking in **The Four Ages of Poetry** (1820) and **The Philosophy of Composition** (1846), and Matthew Arnold's **Essay in Criticism** (1865, 1888). The writings of Walter Pater on culture and art, especially **The Renaissance** (1873) and **Appreciations** (1889) had profound influence on critical thinking.

By the second half of the 19th c. many different critical theories had begun to proliferate, as is clear from a study of the philosophy of aestheticism, the doctrine of art for art's sake and the work of the Symbolist poets. There were fewer rules of any kind as more and more writers experimented. At the same time the work of the best critics continued in the tradition and method of Vico. Sainte-Beuve, with his immense range of learning and his keen sense of critical and judicious detachment, was the supreme exponent of historicism.

Recent criticism has tended to be more and more closely analytical in the evaluation and interpretation of literature, as is evident in the achievements of major critics like M.II Abrams, Eric Auerbach, I.A. Richards etc.

3. What is Literary Criticism

Sometimes the word **criticism** puts people off, because in everyday use it has negative connotations. We usually think of a "critic" as the kind of grumpy person who seems to exist solely to find problems and stress faults.

The word means more than that, however. It comes from the Greek verb **kritikos**, which means to judge or to decide. In its original sense, a critic is simply a person who expresses an informed judgment or opinion about the meaning, value, truth, beauty, or artistry of something.

Let's go more specific. **Literary criticism** is the discipline of **interpreting, analyzing and evaluating** works of literature. **Literature** is most commonly defined as works of writing that

have lasted over the years because they deal with ideas of timeless and universal interest with exceptional artistry and power. This can include poems, stories, novels, plays, essays, memoirs, and so on.

Each of the three main activities of literary criticism – interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating – gives rise to different questions.

The Interpretive Question: What does this work of literature mean? When we **interpret** a work, we set forth one or more of its possible meanings. Reading is like a potluck picnic to which the writer brings the words and the readers bring the meanings. Literary works speak to us all in different ways, and one of the pleasures of talking about books is the chance to check out all the different ideas other readers bring to the picnic.

The Analytic Question: How does this piece of literature work? When we **analyze** a text, we get under the hood to see how the engine operates. Analysis is technical: pulling things apart, examining relationships, figuring out effects. We are not asking **what** a poem means anymore but **how** the author makes it click.

The Evaluative Question: Is this work of literature any good? When **evaluate** a work, we form a personal judgment about its work: Is this a great novel or a rotten one? Why? Does this poem have any value? Why? What does this work of literature add – or subtract – from the world?

4. Does Literary Criticism have any practical use?

The discipline of literary criticism is valuable for a number of reasons, including the following:

First, literary criticism improves your general reading skills, giving you more tools to help solve problems of understanding as you read.

Second, literary criticism can help you in college by expanding your awareness of different approaches, thus giving you more ways to respond to what you read.

Third, literary criticism supports the development of critical thinking skills. It encourages you to identify your own reading habits and to explore beyond their boundaries. It can also give you a sense of confidence and responsibility about developing your own critical standards and judgments and not having to surrender your opinion to other's interpretations. It sharpens your general interpretive, analytic, and evaluative skills. And it improves your ability to make a good argument by encouraging the habit of backing up your opinions with reasons and textual evidence.

For all these reasons, literary criticism can help you develop your skills as an independent thinker and reader.

5. What's a Literary Theory?

In literary criticism, a **theory** is the specific method, approach, or viewpoint a critic or reader has staked out from which he or she interprets, analyzes, and evaluates works of literature – and often the world.

There are numerous literary theories. Some you may find useful, some not so useful. That's for you to judge. But you should learn how each theory or approach works before you make your final judgment.

Here are the essential questions when looking at literary theories:

What are some of the many different ways a reader can approach a book? How does each work? What are the benefits and limitations of each literary lens? Which critical theories make sense and seem useful to you? Which don't? Why?

6. Types of literary Criticism

- a. **Theoretical criticism** proposes an explicit **theory** of literature, in sense of general principles, together with a set of terms, distinctions, and categories, to be applied to identifying and analyzing works of literature, as well as the **criteria** (The standards, or norms) by which these works and their writers are to be evaluated. The earliest, and enduringly important, treatise of theoretical criticism was Aristotle's **Poetics** (fourth century B.C.).
- b. **Practical criticism** or **applied criticism**, concerns itself with the discussion of particular works and writers; in an applied critique, the theoretical principles controlling the mode of the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation are often left implicit, or brought in only as the occasion demands. Among the more influential works of applied criticism in England and America are the literary essays of Dryden in the **Restoration**; Dr. Johnson's **Lives of the English Poets** (1779-81); Coleridge's chapters on the poetry of Wordsworth in **Biographia Literaria** (1817) and his lectures on Shakespeare; William Hazlitt's lectures on Shakespeare and the English poets and so on.
- c. **Impressionistic criticism** attempts to represent in words the felt qualities of a particular passage or work, and to express the responses (the "impression") that the work directly evokes from the critic. As William Hazlitt put it in his essay "On Genius and Common Sense" (1824): "you decide from feeling, and not from reason; that is, from the impression of a number of things on the mind ... though you may not be able to analyze or account for it in the several particulars." And Walter Pater later said that in criticism "the first step toward seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly," and posed as the basic question, "What is thing song or picture ... to /me? (Preface to **Studies in the History of the Renaissance**, 1873). As its extreme this mode of criticism becomes, in Anatole Franc's phrase, "the adventures of a sensitive soul among masterpieces.")
- d. **Judicial criticism**, on the other hand, attempts not merely to communicate, but to analyze and explain the effects of a work by reference to its subject, organization, techniques, and style, and to base the critic's individual judgments on specified criteria of literary excellence.

7. Types of Traditional Critical Theories and Applied Criticism

- a. **Mimetic criticism** views the literary work as an imitation, or reflection, or representation of the world and human life, and the primary criterion applied to a work is the "truth" and "adequacy" of its representation to the matter that it represents, or should represent. This mode of criticism, which first appeared in Plato and (in a qualified way) in Aristotle, remains characteristic of modern theories of literary realism.
- b. **Pragmatic criticism** views the work as something which is constructed in order to achieve certain effects on the audience (effects such as aesthetic pleasure, instruction, or kinds of emotion), and it tends to judge the value of the work according to its successes in achieving that aim. This approach, which largely dominated literary discussion from the versified **Art of Poetry** by the Roman Horace (first century B.C.) through the eighteenth century, has been revived in recent **rhetorical criticism**, which emphasizes the artistic strategies by which an

author engages and influences the responses of readers to the matters represented in a literary work. The pragmatic approach has also been adopted by some **structuralists** who analyze a literary text as a systematic play of codes that effect the interpretative responses of a reader.

- c. **Expressive criticism** treats a literary work primarily in relation to its author. It defines as an expression, or overflow, or utterance of feelings, or as the product of the poet's imagination operating on his or her perceptions, thoughts, and feelings; it tends to judge the work by its sincerity, or its adequacy to the poet's individual vision or state of mind; and it often seeks in the work evidences of the particular temperament and experiences of the author who, consciously or unconsciously has revealed himself or herself in it. such views were developed mainly by romantic critics in the early nineteenth century and remain current in our own time, especially in the writings of **Psychological and Psychoanalytic critics** and in **critics of consciousness** such as Poulet and the Geneva School.
- d. **Objective criticism** deals with a work of literature as something which stands free from what is often called an "extrinsic" relationship to the poet, or to the audience, or to the envioning world. Instead it describes the literary product as a self-sufficient and autonomous object, or else as a world-in-itself, which is to be contemplated as its own end, and to be analyzed and judged solely by "intrinsic" criteria such as its complexity, coherence, equilibrium, integrity, and the interrelations of its component elements. The conception of the self-sufficiency of an aesthetic object was proposed in Kant's **Critique of Aesthetic Judgment** (1790) was taken up by proponents of **art for art's sake** in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and has been elaborated in detailed modes of applied criticism by a number of important critics since the 1920s, including the **New Critics**, the **Chicago School**, and proponents of European **formalism**.
8. Six Approaches to Literature

1. Historical / Biographical Approach

Historical / Biographical critics see works as the reflection of an author's life and times (or of the characters' life and times). H/B approach deems it necessary to know about the author and the political, economical, and sociological context of his times in order to truly understand the work (s).

Advantages: This approach works well for some works - - like those of Alexander Pope, John Dryden, and Milton - - which are obviously political in nature. It also is necessary to take a historical approach in order to place allusions in their proper classical, political, or biblical background.

Disadvantages: New Critics refer to the historical/ biographical critic's belief that the meaning or value of a work may be determined by the author's intention as "the intentional fallacy." Thus, art is reduced to the level of biography rather than universal.

2. Moral /Philosophical Approach

Moral / Philosophical critics believe that the larger purpose of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues. Practitioners include Matthew Arnold (works must have "high seriousness"), Plato (literature must exhibit moralism and utilitarianism), and Horace (literature should be "delightful and instructive").

Advantages: This approach is useful for such works as Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man," which presents an obvious moral philosophy. It is also useful when considering the

themes of works (for example, man's inhumanity to man in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn). Finally, it does not view literature merely as "art" isolated from all moral implications; it recognizes that literature can affect readers, whether subtly or directly, and that the message of a work - and not just the decorous vehicle for that message - is important.

Disadvantages: Detractors argue that such an approach can be too "judgmental." Some believe literature should be judged primarily (if not solely) on its artistic merits, not its moral or philosophical content.

3. Formalism / New criticism

A formalistic approach to literature, once called **New Criticism** involves a **close reading of the text**. Formalistic critics believe that all information essential to the interpretation of a work must be found within the work itself; there is no need to bring in outside information about the history, politics, or society of the time, or about the author's life. Formalistic critics spend much time analyzing irony, paradox, imagery, and metaphor. They are also interested in the work's setting, characters, symbols, and point of view.

Terms used in New Criticism:

- **Tension** – the integral unity of the poem which results from the resolution of opposites, often in irony or paradox
- **Intentional Fallacy** – the belief that the meaning or value of a work may be determined by the author's intention
- **Affective fallacy** – the belief that the meaning or value of a work may be determined by its affect on the reader
- **External form** – rhyme scheme, meter, stanza form, etc.
- **Objective correlative** – originated by T.S. Eliot, this term refers to a collection of objects, situations, or events that instantly evoke a particular emotion.

Advantages: this approach can be performed without much research, and it emphasizes the value of literature apart from its context (in effect makes literature timeless). **Virtually all critical approaches must begin here.**

Disadvantages: The text is seen in isolation. Formalism ignores the context of the work. It cannot account for allusions. It tends to reduce literature to little more than a collection of rhetorical devices.

4. Psychological Approach

Psychological critics view works through the lens of psychology. They look either at the psychological motivations of the characters or of the authors themselves, although the former is generally considered a more respectable approach: most frequently, Freudian and/or Jungian (archetypes) psychology to works.

(a) Freudian Approach

- **Id** (reservoir of libidinal or pleasure principle in the unconscious)
- **Superego** (the moral censoring agency and repository of conscience/pride that protects society)
- **Ego** (the rational governing agent of the unconscious that protects the individual)

Freudian critics steer toward the sexual implications of symbols and imagery, since Freud theorized that all human behavior (drives) derives from libido/sexual energy.

- **Concave Images**, such as fonts, flowers, cups, and caves = female symbols.
- **Convex Images**, such as skyscrapers, submarines, obelisks, etc. = male symbols.
- **Actions**, such as dancing, riding, and flying = sexual pleasure.
- **Water** = birth, the female principle, the maternal, the womb, and the death wish.
- **Oedipus complex** = a boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother.
- **The Electra complex** = a girl's unconscious rivalry with her mother for the love of her father.
- Critics may also refer to Freud's psychology of child development, which includes the **oral stage (eating)**, the **anal stage (elimination)**.

Advantages: A useful tool for understanding some works, in which characters manifest clear psychological issues. Like the biographical approach, knowing something about a writer's psychological make-up can give us insight into his work.

Disadvantages: Psychological criticism can turn a work into little more than a psychological case study, neglecting to view it as a piece of art. Critics sometimes attempt to diagnose long dead authors based on their works, which is perhaps not the best evidence of their psychology. Critics tend to see sex in everything, exaggerating this aspect of literature. Finally, some works do not lend themselves readily to this approach.

(b) Jungian Approach

Jung is also an influential force in myth (archetypal) criticism. Psychological critics are generally concerned with his concept of the process of **individuation** (the process of discovering what makes one different from everyone else). Jung labeled three parts of the self:

- **Shadow** - - the darker, unconscious self; rarely surfaces, yet must be faced for totality of self
- **Persona** - - the public personality/mask (particularly masculine)
- **Anima/Animus** - - a man's / woman's "soul image" (the negative that makes a composite whole)
- A **neurosis** occurs when someone fails to assimilate one of these unconscious components into his conscious and **projects** it on someone else. The persona must be flexible and be able to balance the components of the psych

5. Mythological/Archetypal

A mythological/archetypal approach to literature assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters, and motifs (i.e., **archetypes**) that evokes a similar response in all people. According to the psychologist Carl Jung, mankind possesses a "**collective unconscious**" (a cosmic reservoir of human experience) that contains these archetypes and that is common to all of humanity. Myth critics identify these archetypal patterns and discuss how they function in the works. They believe that these archetypes are the source of much of literature's power.

Advantages: Provides a universalistic approach to literature and identifies a reason why certain literature may survive the test of time. It works well with works that are highly symbolic.

Disadvantages: literature may become little more than a vehicle for archetypes, and this approach may ignore the "art" of literature.

6. Feminist Approach

Feminist criticism is concerned with the impact of gender on writing and reading. It usually begins with a critique of patriarchal culture. It is concerned with the place of female writers in the canon. Finally, it includes a search for a feminine theory or approach to texts. Feminist criticism is political and often revisionist. Feminists often argue that male fears are portrayed through female characters. They may argue that gender determines every-thing, or just the opposite: that all gender differences are imposed by society, and gender determines nothing.

Elaine Showalter's Theory

In A literature of Their Own, Elaine Showalter argued that literary subcultures all go through major phases of development. For literature by or about women, she labels these stages the Feminine, Feminist, and Female:

- **Feminine** Stage - - involves "imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition" and "internalization of its standards."
- **Feminist** Stage - - involves "protest against these standards and values and advocacy of minority rights"
- **Female** Stage - - this is the "phase of self-discovery, a turning inwards freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity."

Advantages: Women have been underrepresented in the traditional canon, and a feminist approach to literature attempts to redress this problem.

Disadvantages: Feminists turn literary criticism into a political battlefield and overlook the merits of works they consider "patriarchal." When arguing for a distinct feminine writing style, they tend to neglect women's literature to a ghetto status; this in turn prevents female literature from being naturally included in the literary canon. The feminist approach is often too theoretical.

9. Conclusion

Literary criticism does not require that we all agree about what a work of literature means, how it works, or whether it's effective. We don't even have to agree with any expert's judgment. We have only two obligations when we assert our opinions.

First, we are obligated to explain as clearly as possible the reasons behind our ideas and back them up with evidence from the actual text we're discussing.

Second, we are obligated to listen respectfully to critics' ideas in the hope that we can learn from learning how others respond to works of literature.

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