

# An Introduction to Literary Criticism and Theory

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## ABSTRACT

Analytical, critical reading of a text is important. The views, facts or figures are better understood, loved and appreciated in relation to its history and we love to read critically. Beginning with Aristotelian criticism, the paper embraces all the major critical concepts, literary theories of different time periods- the Neo-classical age, Restoration period, Victorian age, Twentieth century and thereafter, some theories from different disciplines- psychology, sociology, anthropology and so on, so forth. Seeing a work of art, text through the eyes of others, applying theories, concepts is adding beauty to it. The paper is an attempt to see, view and talk about art, literature and culture in a broader perspective, for faith, for truth.

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It is important to learn to read critically to better understand a work of art and so, of late, many theories have come up and their impact is increasingly felt in the academic world. Various critical theories like post modernism, post colonialism, Marxism, existentialism, feminism, psycho-analysis criticism deconstruction, reader-response theory are becoming very popular but these are not literary theories, these are ideas, concepts, intellectual assumptions and these have come to us from various disciplines like sociology, anthropology psychology so on, so forth as literature has integral connections with philosophy, religion, politics, and morality. The thinkers, intellectuals, the world over, like Marx, Hulme, Kant, Hegel, Freud, Derida, Lacan, Foucault, F.R. Leavis introduced new ideas, concepts, theories which are very helpful , useful in analysing a text and serve to explain the socio -political, historical, cultural context about a it. It may be with Marxist lens or feminist lens or from a post colonial point of view. These are tools which help one focus on a particular aspect of text.

The paper talks about literary criticism, literary theories which have emanated from literature and aims at acquainting one not only with major critical thoughts over the centuries but also empowering one to achieve the key faculties efficiently.

What is criticism? Derived from the Greek word 'kritikos' and Latin word 'criticus', it is an expression of disapproval of something or someone in general and an analysis ,evaluation, a critique in particular. Literary criticism is not about criticizing a thing or being critical about it, it is critiquing a text by one who is well read. It may be a poet, a philosopher or a man of learning and knowledge. Primary source, original things are already there. Creation comes first and criticism later. So it comes as an interpretation of text, like telling about text in terms of its themes and philosophical arguments it puts forth.

Literary criticism is conceived as belonging to literary movements and trends as being determined by literary activity. It is the study, analysis, evaluation and interpretation of literature. "Criticism is the art of judging or evaluation with knowledge or propriety the beauties and faults of the work of art of literature" ( Webster New International Dictionary). To Dryden, it meant the art of judging well. Edward Dowden, an Irish critic and poet declares: "the effort of criticism in our time has been .....to see things as they are without partiality, without obtrusion of personal liking or disliking". To quote Herbert Read ``poetry and criticism are entirely different faculties; they are established on different grounds and have a different point of view."

Beginning with Aristotle (4th century B.C.), the paper will discuss the major key movements, concepts and principles of literary criticism up to the 20th century. The Poetics is the earliest critical work still surviving. Aristotle was the most distinguished disciple of Plato, a philosopher and scientist and he had read from almost all disciplines physics, metaphysics, politics, economics, ethics, aesthetics, linguistics and he wrote Poetics. Preserved in the form of student lecture notes, there are five basic chapters in it.

Written in 26 small chapters, his main concern here is tragedy as it was considered the most developed form of poetry in his day. He has defined tragedy, tragic hero and has given beautiful concepts of hamartia, peripeteia. According to him, tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude.... arousing pity and fear leading to catharsis. By 'action' that is serious, he meant it should be a tale of suffering so as to arouse pity and fear. Action should be complete. It should have a proper beginning, middle and end and that it should be of a certain magnitude ie neither too long, nor too short, then only it can be easily remembered. It should have a length enough to unfold the events naturally. Another term is 'hamartia' that he uses for tragic flaw in the hero. It is the human error or error of judgment as in Hamlet, it is his procrastination, his inability to take action, delayed action that leads him to downfall. Aristotle's tragic hero is virtuous but neither too good nor too bad. He is not a king or noble man as it is in Shakespeare's tragedies - Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, King Lear. It is an ideal tragic hero because if he is too good or too bad, his actions will not arouse normal emotions of pity and fear. According to Aristotle, the aim of tragedy is to create catharsis i.e. creating feelings of pity and fear through art and it is expounding the fundamental principles of any creative art.

Another important critic Longinus had a broad knowledge of literature and he has introduced the concept of 'sublime' in his work, 'On the Sublime'. It is the transcendent element in a piece of literature. According to him, there are five genuine sources of the sublime -the robust ideas as grandeur of thoughts, vehement emotion i.e. strong emotion, the proper construction of figures- figures of thoughts and figures of speech, the nobility of phrase and the dignified and elaborate composition as a whole. He states that ".....the effect of genius is not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves". The artist must avoid affectation, pedantry and sentimentality -impediments to sublimity and must inspire in the reader both objective thought and free emotion. He was one of the first theorists to consider the relationship between the artist's character and his or her work. 'On the Sublime' is an important work in literary aesthetics.

Bharat Muni's '*Natya Shastra*' is based on Rasa theory. Though there are nine *rasas*, eight *rasas* have been mentioned here and these are *shringer*, *hasya*, *veer*, *adbhut*, *roudra*, *karuna*, *vibhatsa*, *bhayank* and these have been beautifully described here, These are connected with human happiness and misery, joy and sorrow and are presented through the process of histrionics i.e. *abhinaya* called '*natya*' here. Referring to the technique of art and drama and the emotions it evokes in the audience, it has deeply influenced Indian aesthetics and critics.

In English literature, criticism came very late not before 16th century, Critical utterances were there like Chaucer's Sir Topas passes literary judgments but in 16 century, Philip Sidney's book *An Apology for Poetry* also known as *The Defence of Poetry* is the first work of literary criticism in English. Written in response to the attacks made on poetry by the puritan Stephen Gosson in his book *The School of Abuse*, it defines poetry as an art of imitation that teaches its audience through delight. Whereas, Gosson found poetry as a waste of time, mother of lies, the nurse of abuse, Sidney found it superior to history and philosophy because it can express things in pleasurable forms. A poet can create new and more perfect realities using his imagination and here he is like God. The book talks about the value of and function of poetry, the nature of imitation which were to concern literary critics in numerous languages until the late 18th century.

In the Restoration Period which is the restoration of Charles II to the throne, also the restoration of monarchy form of government, Dryden comes as the Father of English criticism (Samuel Johnson), also the father of Comparative Criticism. In his work, *An Essay on Criticism*, he upholds Aristotle's definition of poetry as a process of imitation and it should be imitation of things in their ideal form. It should be a work of art, not copy work. He first taught us to determine upon principles the merit of composition, Grounded in classics and a man of letters, he introduced historical method of criticism that is judging a work of art in relation to socio-cultural, political, historical background because literature changes in the milieu of prevailing social, political, religious, cultural, historical conditions. No literature of one age can serve as a model for another age. Taste varies in relation to time and place He is the father of comparative criticism because he has critically compared Shakespeare and Ben Jonson Chaucer and Ovid, Horace and Juvenal, ancient and modern drama, Elizabethan and restoration drama and so on. His work *Dramatic Poesy* is actually a drama in which opinions of four speakers- lords, aristocrats of time have been dramatized and the debate is about poetry in particular and literature in general. Whereas he is relying on old classical rules, using terminology derived from Horace- nature wit, art, delight instructing decorum, he is moderate in his approach to it and shows his regard for modern writers as well saying that they might surpass the Greeks and Romans. He has commented on writers and their works and we come across such names as Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Johnson and many more. Restoration criticism is represented by Dryden.

'Those rules of old' which learned Greece discovered in human nature were carried forward in the age of Pope. Homer, Virgil, Horace, Boileau are some of the major influences on Pope -'Be Homer's works your study and delight/ read them by day and meditate by night.' It is early 18th century. 17th and 18th century are the new classical ages. Individual opinion was not important. What was important was set values, set norms, to be accepted by all and whosoever deviated from the established norms came in for heavy criticism. His *Essay on Criticism* is an exposition of literary theory and practice. He was 22 then. He advised critics 'to follow nature' that is to read and understand ancient writers and learn from them. Nature here is not river, Sun, moon or cloud as in Wordsworth. It is human nature and respect for rules, ancient rules. The authority comes from the ancient and the writers must follow the rules laid down by authorities. But there should be no blind adherence because not all good work can be explained by rules : 'some duties yet no precepts can declare/ for there is happiness/ as well as care'. According to him, the poet as well as critic draw their inspiration from heaven and the job of a critic is to judge and to point out if there is any laxity. Though generous in his affection for parents and many friends, he has condemned and criticized many of his contemporaries, literary critics for their shortcomings. Written in heroic couplet, the poem has become a masterpiece for critical judgment.

Another important critic of the later 18th century, Samuel Johnson is both poet and critic but better known as a critic and particularly a critic of Shakespeare. There is no particular work on criticism but his remarks on

poetry came in many papers. His 'The Preface to the Plays of Shakespeare' is considered a classic document of English literary criticism. His other important work 'The Lives of the English poets' is a biographical- cum-critical account of 52 poets, There is respect for the rules but no blind reverence to authority, ancient or modern. As a critic and as an editor of Shakespeare's plays, he has influenced many critics. In romantic criticism ie towards the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, there is total reversal of neo- classical aesthetics. Things started taking turn and there came two historical events -American war of 1776 and the French revolution of 1789, these brought about radical change in the outlook of people of Europe. America included. Wordsworth wrote Lyrical Ballads in 1798 in collaboration with Coleridge and added a monumental preface to it in the second edition in 1800 as a defense to the experimental poetry they had written. This brought a revolution in literature and literary criticism. There was a new line of thought,a new type of writing changing the course of poetry, The critical pronouncements about poetry and poetic diction came as a reaction. A revolt against neo- classical diction, what was inside was more important, more reliable than the frame, shape, structure outside. There were no set rules, no general rules accepted by all. Emphasis was on individualism and so we have different sets of romantic poets. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron ,Shelley and Keats. From reason, precision, rationality, restraint and objectivity of neoclassical poetry, romantic poetry moved to imagination, wonder, beauty, mystery, magic, escapism, melancholy, subjectivity and love of nature. The Preface to Lyrical Ballads gave new theory of poetry, new diction. The subject should be simple life. Earlier, literature was primarily concerned with the questions of the divine, then it was taken over by the kings and queens and the heroic people. Now it advocated for simple life and simple diction. His poetry is concerned with the life of peasant in the Lyrical Ballads and it is written in ordinary language."It should be written in the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society being less under the influence of social vanity".(The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads). His definition of poetry as 'a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and that it takes 'its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility' has become very popular. The emotion has to be deep and powerful out of what poet has observed but he has not to start right then, he has to recollect and contemplate it till its unessential ingredients are eliminated and the poet is back with his recollections of the object, in a mood ,calm and tranquil and then what comes is the final product, that is composition. This is the process of creation. Also he says that poetry is born in the heart overflowing with feelings. Feelings are more important than the plot or action here. Meter is also important as it adds charm to poetry. In totality, poetry should be a profound experience.

S. T. Coleridge' s work Biographia Literaria is an important work of literary criticism of the English romantic period. It is an autobiography about his literary life and opinions. It gives his poetic theory and philosophical views. It combines philosophy and criticism in a new way. The phrase coined by him 'willing suspension of disbelief' is very helpful in understanding and enjoying a work of art. It is suspending into unreal willingly, for faith, poetic faith, aesthetic pleasure.

Temper was compromising in the Victorian age and poetry as criticism of life came to deal with life. The subject matter and themes of poetry should be relevant to the lives of people and there should be noble and profound application of ideas to life. The 'touchstone method, which he introduced in his book, The study of Poetry is the theory of tradition where by we measure contemporary works against the set of acknowledged classics. It is assessing the merit of poetry. Twentieth century saw the advent of new theories and various schools of criticism to engage with modernist texts. 'Tradition and Individual Talent' is an important essay where in he states that tradition and individual talent go together in a work and that poetry is 'not turning loose of emotion but and escape from emotion'. A writer should write with a 'historical sense' a perception not

only of the pastness of the past but of its presence and this way there will remain a sense of continuity. He has used the term 'objective correlative' which was initially used by American painter, Washington Allston but Eliot discussed it in his essay 'On Hamlet and his Problems. In simple words, the writer has to create images, objects, pictures to evoke a particular emotion in the reader. He has influenced new critics and writers in a big way. At a time when literature is dazzlingly diverse, exciting and evolving, a brief dialogue with the critics above would help better understand the beauty and complexity of a work of art.

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