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A Critical Overview of Literary Criticism and Its Relevance to Literature

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Abstract:

A brief introduction to history of criticism is to be given at the outset. Then the indication of the word 'Literary Criticism' along with the origin and development of Literary Criticism has to be examined. There are many ways in which criticism may be classified. There are some major critical theories such as mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective. One common dichotomy for criticism is Aristotelian vs. Platonic. Aristotelian criticism implies a judicial, logical, formal criticism that tends to find the values of a work either within the work itself or inseparably linked to the work where as Platonic criticism implies a moralistic, utilitarian view of art, where the values of a work are to be found in the usefulness of art for other and nonartistic purposes. Further the classification of Criticism is done according to the purpose that it is intended to serve i.e. to justify, to describe, to interpret, to judge, to discover various literary and its relevant aspects. This paper also examines various critical, literary concepts from Aristotle's Poetics to Husserl's Phenomenological criticism. Finally the conclusions are drawn by means of the review of literature indicated.

Key Words: Literary Theory, Types of Criticism, Classicism, Romanticism, Historical Criticism, New Criticism, Phenomenological criticism.

Introduction:

The analysis, study, and evaluation of individual works of art or literature as well as the formulation of general methodological or aesthetic principles for the examination of such works is called as Literary Criticism. From the earliest days of literary history, criticism has been a major aspect of literary theory and practice. A backward glance over the history of criticism in the light of many theories is useful. The mimetic theory is characteristic of the criticism of the classical age, with Aristotle as its great expounder. Horace introduced the idea of instruction with pleasure and the effect upon the audience in the focus was central to his view of art. From Horace through most of the eighteenth century, the pragmatic theory was dominant, although the neoclassic critics revived a serious interest in imitation. At the same time, it is true that criticism through the 18th century was strongly confident of the imitative nature of art. With the beginnings of romanticism came the expressive theory, in a sense the most characteristic of the romantic attitudes. When Wordsworth calls poetry “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” the artist has moved to the centre. Now the poet’s imagination is a new force in the world and a source of unique knowledge, and expression is the true function of art. Beginning in the 19th century and becoming dominant in the twentieth has been the “poem per se ... written solely for the poem’s sake,” as Poe expressed it. Form and structure, patterns of imagery and symbols, became the centre of the critic’s concern, for the work of art is viewed as a separate cosmos. However, increasing interest in psychology has kept the contemporary critic also aware of the fact that the audience functions in the work of art, and views of the myth current today tend to bring the artist back to a central position and at the same time to value in terms of the audience the truth the artist speaks through his or her archetypal patterns and images from the racial unconsciousness. These views of criticism will help us map the history of the criticism.

Types of Criticism:

Criticism is a term which has been applied since the seventeenth century to the description, justification, analysis, or judgment of works of art. There are many ways in which criticism may be classified. Some of the more common classifications are given here, as supplementary to M. H. Abrams’ discrimination among the major critical theories as mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective. One common dichotomy for criticism is Aristotelian vs. Platonic. In this sense, Aristotelian implies a judicial, logical, formal criticism that tends to find the values of a work either within the work itself or inseparably linked to

the work; and platonic implies a moralistic, utilitarian view of art, where the values of a work are to be found in the usefulness of art for other and nonartistic purposes. Such a view of platonic criticism is narrow and in part inaccurate, but those who hold it point to the exclusion of the poet from Plato's Republic. Essentially what is meant by the Aristotelian-Platonic dichotomy is an intrinsic-extrinsic separation. A separation between relativistic criticism and absolutist criticism is also often made, in which the relativistic critic employs any or all systems which will aid in reaching and elucidating the nature of a work of art, whereas the absolutist critic holds that there is one proper critical procedure or set of principles and no others should be applied to the critical task.

There is also an obvious division between theoretical criticisms which attempts to arrive at the general principles of art and to formulate inclusive and enduring aesthetic and critical tenets and practical criticism sometimes called "applied" criticism, which brings these principles or standards to bear upon particular works of art.

Criticism is often divided into the following types in literary and critical histories:

- a) Impressionistic criticism emphasizes how the work of art affects the critic.
- b) Historical criticism examines the work against its historical surroundings and the facts of its author's life and times.
- c) Textual criticism attempts by all scholarly means to reconstruct the original manuscript or textual version of the work.
- d) Formal criticism examines the work in terms of the characteristics of the type or genre to which it belongs.
- e) Judicial criticism judges the work by a definable set of standards.
- f) Analytical criticism attempts to get at the nature of the work as an object in itself through the detailed analysis of its parts and their organization.
- g) Moral criticism evaluates the work in relation to human life.
- h) Mythic criticism explores the nature and significance of the archetypes and archetypal patterns in the work.
- i) Structural criticism studies literature as a series of linguistic structures whose meanings are made possible through systems of convention.
- j) Phenomenological criticism makes an existential analysis of the worlds created in the consciousness by the language of art.

These widely differing classification systems for criticism are not mutually exclusive, and there are certainly others. These will serve, however, to indicate to the reader that the

critic has employed a great variety of strategies in getting at the work of art and communicating what he or she finds there. Criticism may also be classified according to the purpose that it is intended to serve.

The main purposes that critics have had are:

- a) To justify one's own work or to explain it and its underlying principles to an uncomprehending audience – Dryden, Wordsworth, Henry James.
- b) To justify imaginative art in a world that tends to find its value questionable – Sidney, Shelley, the new criticism.
- c) To prescribe rules for writers and to legislate taste for the audience – Pope, Boileau, and the Marxists.
- d) To interpret works to readers who might otherwise fail to understand or appreciate them – Edmund Wilson, Matthew Arnold.
- e) To judge works by clearly defined standards of evaluation – Samuel Johnson, T. S. Eliot.
- f) To discover and to apply the principles those describe the foundations of good art – Coleridge, Addison, I. A. Richards.

M. H. Abrams, in his *The Mirror and The Lamp*, has pointed out that all critical theories, whatever their language, discriminate four elements in “the total situation of a work of art,” and he distinguishes among both the kinds of criticism and the history of critical theory and practice in terms of the dominance of one of these elements. They are:

- The work, that is, the thing made by the maker, the poem produced by the poet, the artefact created by the artificer.
- The artist, the maker, the poet, the artificer.
- The universe, that is, the nature that is imitated, if art is viewed as imitation, the materials of the real world or the world of ideal entities out of which the work may be thought to take its subject.
- The audience, the readers, spectators, or listeners to whom the work is addressed.

The first important critical treatise, the *Poetics* of Aristotle (4th century B.C.), has proved to be the most influential. He defined poetry as an idealized representation of human action, and tragedy as a serious, dramatic representation or imitation of some magnitude, arousing pity and fear wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of such emotions; tragedies should have unity and completeness of plot, with beginning, middle, and end. The *Poetics* also treats the element of character in tragedy and the relation of tragedy to epic poetry.

Aristotle's treatise on the Homeric epic has not survived. The great attention given by the ancients to rhetoric is also important critically, however developed largely because of the interest in oratory. Eventually, the great influence of the Poetics began in the renaissance. Another important Greek document is the treatise of Longinus, *On the Sublime*. It has much difference from the Poetics of Aristotle in content and spirit and this work acclaims sublimity, height, and imagination in a style that is itself enthusiastic and eloquent. Thus Longinus finds the sources of the sublime in great conceptions, noble passions, and elevated diction.

The leading Latin critic was Horace. His *Art of Poetry* written as an informal epistle in verse which exercised considerable influence. It discusses types of poetry and of character, stresses the importance of Greek models, emphasizes the importance of decorum, and advises the poet to write for both entertainment and instruction. Many of Horace's phrases have entered the language of criticism, such as "poetry is like painting", "the labour of the file" and "either to profit or to please." The influence of Horace's criticism was especially great in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Quintilian's *Institutes of Oratory* is, after Horace's epistle, perhaps the most important Latin critical treatise. Other ancient critics include Plato, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Plutarch, and Lucian among the Greeks; and Cicero, the Seneca's, Petronius, and Macrobius among the Latin writers. The art of rhetoric constituted an integral part of this literary criticism.

In the Middle Ages, most criticism dealt with Latin versification, rhetoric, and grammar. The ecclesiastical theologians who dominated intellectual life regarded literature as a servant of theology and philosophy, and there was a reduced interest in imaginative literature as such. Classical literature was little known, and there was little contemporary literature of a sort to arouse critical interest. The rhetoricians dealt in detail with technical matters of vital interest to the creative writer: the use and nature of figurative language; organization; beginnings; endings; development i.e. amplification, condensation; style – especially the adaptation of style to type of composition; ornamentation, and such matters. The great influence of such teachings upon the early work of Chaucer has been shown in detail.

In renaissance England the earliest critical utterances were directed toward matters of rhetoric and diction, as in the "prefaces" of the printer Caxton (late 15th century) and the rhetoric of Leonard Cox (1530) and Thomas Wilson (1553). As early as Sir Thomas Elyot's *Book Named the Governour* (1531), the claims of English as a vehicle for literature were

being urged against the extreme humanist opposition to the vernacular as crude and not permanent. The first technical treatise on English versification was Gascoigne's Certain Notes of Instruction (1575). Verse forms already developed in English, including rhyme, were perfected in the face of the critical impulse to insist upon such classical forms as the unrhymed hexameter. Practice ran ahead of theory in this matter, as may be seen by comparing the actual practices of Sidney and Campion with their serious critical condemnation of rhyme. Campion's essay, *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* (1602), was effectively answered by Samuel Daniel in his *A Defence of Rime*. Similarly, Shakespearean romantic tragedy developed in spite of the prevailing critical insistence upon the unities.

A fundamental critical issue centred on the effort to justify literature in the face of the Puritan attack on moral grounds, a movement aimed at the drama in particular, as in Stephen Gosson's *The School of Abuse* (1579). Many of these critical questions were treated in Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* (1595), the most significant piece of criticism of the period. Sidney stressed the high function of the poet, exalted poetry above philosophy and history, answered the objections to poetic art, and examined the types of poetry, and assigned praise and blame among the writers of the preceding generation on the basis of their conformity to classical principles as expressed by the Italian critics. Important critical expressions came from Francis Bacon in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605) and Ben Jonson in his *Timber or Discoveries*. Jonson, a man of vast learning and uncommon common sense, shows a definite tendency toward the Neoclassicism that was to become the centre of English criticism for more than a century.

The next brilliant critic was John Dryden, with his numerous prefaces and essays, the best known of which is the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668). This treatise, written in dialogue form, fairly presents the claims of "Ancients and Moderns" of French and English dramatists; rhyme, tragicomedy, and the unities receive consideration; the influence of Corneille is apparent; and much practical criticism keeps the essay from being entirely theoretical. In his *Preface to the Fables* (1700) Dryden gives a noteworthy estimate of the genius of Chaucer. Other critics of the restoration age include Sir Robert Howard, Thomas Rymer, the Earls of Mulgrave and Roscommon, and Sir William Temple. The foreign influence was predominantly French.

Alexander Pope was not only the leading poet of his generation, but also its most significant critic, with the prefaces to his translation of Homer, his edition of Shakespeare,

and his *Essay on Criticism* (1711), one of the best pieces of verse criticism in the language. In this work Pope set forth the neoclassic principles of following nature and the ancients, outlined the causes of bad criticism, described the good critic, and concluded with a short history of criticism. Addison's critical papers in the *Spectator* (1711-1712) on tragedy, wit, ballads, *Paradise Lost*, and the pleasures of the imagination were designed for a popular audience, but they exerted a strong influence upon formal criticism and aesthetic theory. The neoclassical critics in general devoted themselves to such topics as reason, correctness, wit, taste, genres, rules, imitation, the classics, and the function of the imagination, the status of emotion, and the dangers of enthusiasm. As the sway of authority weakened, the historical point of view gained in acceptance; textual criticism became more scientific. Samuel Johnson was the major defender of the older order; his large body of criticism is in his periodical essays, the preface to his edition of Shakespeare, and his *Lives of the Poets*.

Further, Joseph Warton in his 'Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope' (1756) refused Pope the highest rank among poets because of insufficient emotion and imagination; Thomas Warton in his 'Observations on The Faerie Queene of Spenser' (1754) emphasized the emotional quality of the poet; Young in his 'Conjectures on Original Composition' (1759) spoke in favour of independence and against the imitation of other writers; Hurd in his 'Letters on Chivalry and Romance' (1762) justified gothic manners and design, Spenser's poetry, and the Italian poets, and attacked some of the main tenets of the Augustans. The romantic impulse was growing. Other eighteenth-century critics included John Dennis, Henry Fielding, Edmund Burke, Goldsmith, Lord Karnes, Hugh Blair, and Sir Joshua Reynolds.

It is generally acknowledged that the combined work of Wordsworth and Coleridge i.e. *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) is a representative in the Romantic Movement. For the second edition (1800) Wordsworth wrote a preface that acted as a manifesto for the new school and set forth his own critical creed. It was his object to "choose incidents and situations from common life," to use "language really used by men." Wordsworth was reacting from what he considered the artificial poetic practice of the preceding era; he condemned the use of personification and "poetic diction." There could be "no essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." Wordsworth defined the poet as a "man speaking to men" and poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" which originates in emotion "recollected in tranquillity."

Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) explained the division of labour in the *Lyrical Ballads*: his own endeavours "should be directed to persons and characters

supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith”; while Wordsworth was “to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention to ... loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.” “Coleridge disagreed with Wordsworth’s statements about the principles of meter and poetic diction: rustic life is not favourable to the formation of a human diction; poetry is essentially ideal and generic; the language of Milton is as much that of real life as is that of the cottager; art strives to give pleasure through beauty. His discussion of the imagination and the fancy has had wide influence. English romanticism found some sources in the philosophy, aesthetics, and literature of German romanticism.

Other critics of importance in the first half of the nineteenth century were Lamb, Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt. Lamb’s criticism was charming and enthusiastic but eccentric, capricious, and unorganized; it showed good taste, great originality of thought, and it stimulated the appreciation of earlier English literature. Hazlitt is remarkable for many happy phrases, sound judgment, and an infectious spirit. Hunt is a most catholic and readable critic. The poet Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* (1821) is an abstract apologia reminiscent of renaissance treatises. Other critics of this period are: William Blake, Cardinal Newman, Carlyle, De Quincey, Landor, Henry Hallam, and Macaulay. The review journals, the *Whig Edinburgh Review* edited by Francis Jeffrey and the *Tory Quarterly Review* edited by William Gifford voiced fundamentally conservative opinions and dominated periodical criticism.

Matthew Arnold was the leading English critic of the last half of the nineteenth century. He thought of poetry as a “criticism of life” and of criticism itself as the effort to “know the best that is known and thought in the world and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas.” form, order, and measure constituted the classical qualities that Arnold admired. He sought to judge literature by high standards; he used specimens or touchstones of great poetry as well as his own sensitive taste in forming judgments. “The grand style,” he said, “arises in poetry, when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject.” The greatness of a poet “lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life.” Three of his better known critical

essays are *The Function of Criticism* (1865), *The Study of Poetry* (1888), and *On Translating Homer* (1861).

Early 19th century criticism, as evidenced by the earlier numbers of the *North American Review* established in 1815, was conservative and neoclassic. Pope and the Scottish school reigned. Later, the romantic attitude triumphed, and Byron, Scott, Wordsworth, and eventually Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Tennyson were exalted. The earlier writer-critics were in the main romantic: Poe, Lowell, and Emerson". Poe, however, stressed workmanship, technique, structure, the divorce of art and morality; was highly rational; and enunciated independent theories of the lyric and the short story. Emerson believed art should serve moral ends; asserted that all American literature was derivative but should not be; and assumed the romantic attitude toward nature and individualism. Lowell is first impressionistic and romantic; at times professedly realistic; and eventually classical and ethical, after his revolt against sentimentalism.

In the later 19th century the tenets of romanticism were still strong, but the principles of realism and of impressionism were gaining ground. The expansion of natural science helped the progress of realistic and naturalistic criticism which was a reaction against both classicism and romanticism. Historical criticism attempted to understand a work in the light of "the man and the milieu" in process of development for at least two centuries, at last crystallized in the writings of the Frenchmen Saint-Beuve and Taine. Impressionism grew out of romanticism and obtained an eloquent advocate in Walter Pater. Victorian critics discussed such topics as the function and nature of art and literature, the role of morality, the place of the imagination, the problems of style, the province of the novel, and the theory of the comic. The tendency of criticism was away from the application of standards toward the use of impressionistic methods. The German influence yielded ground to the French. Significant contributions were made by Thackeray on the English humorists; John Stuart Mill on the nature of poetry; Walter Bagehot on pure, ornate, and grotesque art in poetry; Pater on style and on hedonism in art; George Meredith on the comic spirit; Leslie Stephen on the eighteenth century; and Swinburne on the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists.

After the Civil War a strong critical movement toward realism developed, and it had two powerful critical spokesmen, William Dean Howells and Henry James. Interested almost exclusively in fiction and particularly in the novel, they advanced a theory that the fidelity of the work to the universe, with universe defined in a materialistic or psychological-social sense, was the object of art. Realism was defined by Howells as "nothing more and nothing

less than the truthful treatment of material.” Yet there were aspects of the pragmatic theory here, for he saw a moral obligation resting on the artist in terms of the effects of the artist’s works on the audience. At the close of the century, under the influence of the French, particularly Zola, a group of American novelists were advancing a theory of art that was frankly mimetic; this is the application of scientific method, even of scientific law, to enhance the seriousness and increase the depth of the portraying of the actual by the artist. The theory is naturalism, and Frank Norris was its most vocal expounder as the century ended. However, Henry James, in critical essays already written and in the prefaces which he prepared for the collected edition of his novels in the first decade of the twentieth century, was to make the most significant formulation of critical principles about the novel, centring in craftsmanship, that an American has produced. James and Poe emerge from nineteenth-century America as the most powerful and original American critics of the age.

In England and America the first decade of the 20th century saw a continuation of the concern with realism and naturalism, but little serious critical examination of them. Impressionism and “appreciation” led in England by Walter Pater and his followers and in America by James Huneker, ruled the day. In the second decade, a group of Americans, under the leadership of Van Wyck Brooks, attacked the cultural failures of America and began the search for a “usable past” a search which was to occupy men like Randolph Bourne, Lewis Mumford down to the 1950’s and which saw in 1927–1930 in Vernon L. Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* one of the major documents in critical scholarship. At the same time, in England two young Americans, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot were learning from T. E. Hulme to distrust romantic expressionism and to turn to formalism and objectivity. In the 1920’s the impact of the new psychologies was deeply felt in England, particularly in the work of I. A. Richards, whose reaction against impressionism expressed itself in efforts to make an exact science of the examination of how literature produced psychological states in its reader. He was followed by Herbert Read and William Empson. In America, Freudian psychology was applied to literary problems by a variety of critics, but the strong movement was the new humanism, which, under the leadership of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, formulated a critical position resting on the traditional moral and critical standards of the humanists.

In the 1930’s, as a partial aftermath of the financial collapse, came a wave of critics espousing Marxist and near Marxist ideas – a specialized form of pragmatic theory both in England and America. The major English Marxist was Christopher Caudwell. While no

Americans approached him in excellence, critics like Granville Hicks and V. F. Calverton strongly espoused the reading of literature in the light of radical social views. During the 1930's in America, reacting both against the new humanists and the Marxist critics came a group, drawn largely from the agrarians, who vigorously embraced an objective theory of art. Led by John Crowe Ransom, who gave them a name and something resembling a credo in his book *The New Criticism*, these essentially conservative and antiromantic writers—Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Donald Davidson, Yvor Winters, and later Cleanth Brooks, started from the position of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and quickly formed themselves into a powerful force in the formal criticism of literature. At the same time a similar group, though much less organized, was practicing a stringent and aesthetically centred criticism in England, among them being Eliot himself, F. R. Leavis, and Cyril Connolly. Both in England and America, the theories of Carl Jung about the racial unconscious have been operative and have received vigorous expression by writers like Maud Bodkin and Eliot in England and Susanne Langer and Francis Fergusson in America. Centred on Chicago and often called “The Chicago Critics,” a group of neo-Aristotelian critics led by Ronald Crane, Richard McKeon, and Elder Olson have formulated a kind of formal criticism based on Aristotle's principles. From this group has come Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, a major critical effort to come to grips with fiction.

At the present time the method of Husserl, commonly known as phenomenology, is a widely used method for critics who lean toward existentialism, such as J. Hillis Miller and Paul Brodtkorb. The liveliest critical concept of the present, however, is structuralism, which is a method of analysis inspired by structural linguistics and structural anthropology. The central figure in the movement, which originated in France in the 1960's, is Claude Levi-Strauss, the anthropologist. Among the major structural critics are Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobson, and Jacques Derrida. The twentieth century is often called an age of criticism, and in the richness and complexity of its systems, the rigor of its application, and the enthusiasm of its espousal of the cause of the literary arts it can wear that title with honour.

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