

UNIT 1

Nature and Function of Literary Criticism

i. Definition

Etymologically the word criticism is derived from Greek word meaning 'Judgement'. It is an exercise in judgement. Literary criticism is the exercise of judgement on works of literature. To examine the merits and demerits and finally to evaluate the artistic worth, is the function of criticism. Thus, literary criticism is the study, discussion, evaluation, and interpretation of literature.

Literary criticism is the evaluation of literary works. This includes its classification by genre, structure, and judgement of value (Beckson & Ganz, 1989). Literary criticism asks what literature is, what it does, and what it is worth. (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

How would you interpret the definition of literary criticism in your own words?
Let's look at the answer below:

Literary criticism helps readers like you and me interpret the literature we read. Each literary theory provides us with a different way of looking at a given literary work, which can ultimately reveal important aspects about it.

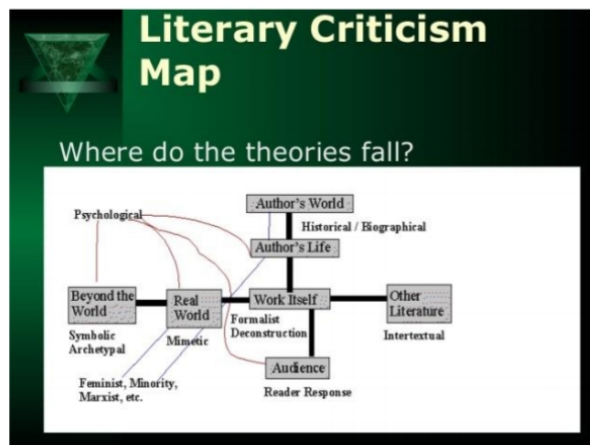
But what are these important facts?

Literary criticism helps us to understand what is important about a literary text. For example:

- its structure
- its context: social, economic, historical
- how the text manipulates the reader

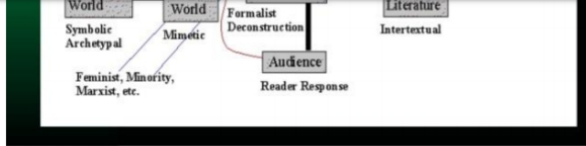
So in short, literary criticism helps us to understand the relationship between authors, readers, and literary texts. The act of literary criticism ultimately enhances the enjoyment of our reading of the literary work. Figure 1 below illustrates this relationship.

Figure1: The Literary Criticism Map



Source: <http://image.slidesharecdn.com/literarycriticism>

What does this literary work mean? The **work itself** is placed in the center because all approaches must deal, to some extent or another, with the text itself. Hence:



Source: <http://image.slidesharecdn.com/literarycriticism>

2

3/54

What does this literary work mean? The **work itself** is placed in the center because all approaches must deal, to some extent or another, with the text itself. Hence:

- Different approaches or lenses help us to discover rich and deeper meaning.
- Each lens has its strengths and weaknesses
- Each lens is valuable
- Try to become a pluralist rather than an inflexible supporter of one

Criticism is the exercise of judgement in the area of art and literature. It is the overall term for studies concerned with defining, analysing, and evaluating works of literature. It refers to description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of literary works. Literary criticism deals with different dimensions of literature.

According to Griffith (2002), prior to the 20th century, the investigation of the nature and value of literature had had a long and distinguished history, beginning with Plato and Aristotle and continuing into modern times with such figures as Sir Philip Sidney, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold. But their investigations focused primarily on evaluation, not interpretation. They explored what literature is and praised or condemned works that failed to meet whichever standards they deemed essential. In *The Republic*, to cite one extreme example, Plato condemned all literature because it stirs up the passions—lust, desire, pain, anger—rather than nurtures the intellect.

ii. The principles of criticism

We now consider what standard of judgement should a critic follow and what qualification and instruments/equipment should s/he possess.

Every literary work has three elements:

- matter
- manner
- capacity to please (aesthetic pleasure).

Earlier, critics devised rules by which technical excellence - plot construction, diction, style, meter and language - of literary work. These rules have always changed with time. Essential quality of literature is not how rigidly such rules are followed but appeal to the imagination. Human nature and subsequently principles of literature are held universal and permanent. We observe three such principles:

The first principle of criticism is the pursuit of truth, as poetic truth is the truth of ideas, and experiences of a work of art. The truth of literature is different from the truth of science. Poetic truth is the ideas, and experiences of a work of art.

The second principle is concerned with symmetry (construction) - which implies the right selection and arrangement of material.

This principle implies right selection and arrangement of material. The writer should select certain aspects of reality and not all reality and then his material should be so arranged as to throw the selected aspects of reality into sharp relief. Aristotle stressed on this. In his view it is essential for that artistic beauty on which the imaginative appeal of literature depends. The critic must examine if the various parts of the composition are originally related to each other or not, whether they are proportionate to each other and to the composition as whole or not. The test of the symmetry is indirectly a means by which the presence of the dominant artistic quality can be discovered and measured.

3

The final principle is that of idealisation -which implies the aesthetic (beauty) consciousness of the reader. The selection made for artistic treatment should be so made that unpleasant aspect to aesthetic consciousness of reader is kept away or minimised by virtue of which a work of art gives pleasure.

(Adapted from: <http://www.tmv.edu>)

iii. Functions of Literary Criticism

The function of literary criticism is to examine the merits and demerits or defects of a work of art and finally to evaluate its worth. The chief function of criticism is to enlighten and stimulate. The true critic is the one who is equipped for his/her task by a sound knowledge of his subject. The true critic can discover the qualities of power, beauty and depth of significance. S/he can give us a fresh point of view. S/he is sometimes a path finder, breaking new ground, with a friendly passion. As such the primary functions of literary criticism are interpretation and judgment.

Another important factor to note is that the view of criticism is directly related to the critic's own intellectual philosophy or outlook of life. It is determined by the likes, dislikes, and prejudices of the critic him/herself and this is equally shaped by the socio-political sensibilities of the critic's environment. As such, critical theories are shaped by the spirit of the age.

iv. Literary criticism vs Literary theory

Even though modern literary theorising and criticism emerged during the 19th century, both attained greater heights in the 20th century. In fact, the 20th century could be appropriately termed the age of criticism. The richness and the complexity of literary theory can be seen in the many critical movements that sprang up and in the enthusiasm with which many critics practised the art. The impact of the new psychologies was deeply felt in criticism.

In the preface to *A History of Literary Criticism* (1991), A. N. Jeffares gives no room for any doubt about the kinship of literature, literary criticism and literary theories. He says:

The study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote. What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background, etc?

The argument of Jeffares is that for literature to be on course, it becomes expedient that a structure is put in place to reveal its meaning beyond the literal level. Broadly, texts of literature would possess two levels of meaning - the literal and the super-literal. The super-literal meaning of texts of literature is the ideological implication of the same, which criticism attempts to resolve. The task of resolving the crisis engendered in literary texts is possible through the formulation of some principles, parameters and paradigms which are technically termed theories. Theories are meant to interpret and evaluate works of literature with the mind of revealing the in-depth implications of such works.

Thus, literary theory and criticism is an unavoidable part of studying literature. Literary theory and criticism aim to explain, entertain, stimulate and challenge the student of literature. Literary theory and criticism make literature refreshing, informative and stimulating in many ways. Some of the ways include:

Literary theory and criticism help us to achieve a better understanding of literature. A better understanding of the world in which we live, automatically, comes along when we study literature, and the study of critical theory makes that enterprise even more productive.

Thus, literary theory and criticism is an unavoidable part of studying literature. Literary theory and criticism aim to explain, entertain, stimulate and challenge the student of literature. Literary theory and criticism make literature refreshing, informative and stimulating in many ways. Some of the ways include:

Literary theory and criticism help us to achieve a better understanding of literature. A better understanding of the world in which we live, automatically, comes along when we study literature, and the study of critical theory makes that enterprise even more productive.

4

5/54

Literary theory and criticism can, not only show us our world and ourselves through new and valuable lenses, but also strengthen our ability to think logically, creatively, and with a good deal of insight in analysing works of literature.

So what then is the difference between literary theory and literary criticism?

A theory as a body of rules or principles used to appraise works of literature. Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read literary texts. All literary theories are lenses through which we can see texts. You cannot say that one is better than another or that you should read according to any of them, but it is sometimes fun to "decide" to read a text with one in mind because you often end up with a whole new perspective on your reading. As you read the different texts in your literature courses, you will realise that to study literary theory is to seek to understand exactly how readers (critics) interpret (criticise) texts, especially literary ones.

Most scholars today would agree that there is no single meaning waiting to be simply *found* in any text. It is our role as readers to *produce meaning*. In other words, it is a function of the different interpretative strategies which we as readers apply to a text. Thus, a cardinal rule of modern literary criticism could be summed up as follows: *the 'answers' you get from a text depend entirely upon the kind of 'questions' you put to it*. Strictly speaking, when we interpret a literary text, we are doing **literary criticism**, but when we examine the criteria upon which our interpretation rests, we are **applying literary theory**. In other words, **literary criticism is the application of critical theory to a literary text**, whether or not a given critic is aware of the theoretical assumptions informing his or her interpretation. In fact, the widespread recognition that literary criticism cannot be separated from the theoretical assumptions on which it is based is one reason why the word *criticism* is often used as if it includes the word *theory*. (Adapted from: <http://www.nou.edu.ng/>)

Let's proceed to examine the qualities of a critic

The qualities (characteristics) of a critic

It is also important for you to know the qualities of a critic, namely:

1. He/she must be someone of rare sensibility - have a rare and unique sense of judgment.
2. He must be someone widely read.
3. He must have proper training and technical skill in different branches of literature.
4. He must rise above all prejudices, personal, religious, national, political or literary so as to be objective.
5. He must have imaginative sympathy - be sensitive and humane.
6. He must possess a sound knowledge of human psychology and human nature.
7. He must have knowledge in all branches of literature.
8. The critic must get at the mind of the author
9. The critic must have a philosophical mind.
10. Must be of varied experience - thoroughly acquainted with the great authors in several languages.

5