

*A Survey of Literary Criticism
With Special Reference
to The Contributions of English Critics*

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1. Introduction :

The purpose of literature is to educate and entertain its readers. Any literary work may be interpreted in different ways depending on the personality and abilities of the one who reads it. In order to bridge the gap between the author and the readers, the technique of literary criticism appeared as a form of judgement and interpretation of literary texts. Literary criticism developed throughout the centuries and took different shapes. The Europeans attempted to establish certain rules to deal with such a domain. The English literary men also contributed in making criticism more effective. Thus , many English critics emerged on the scene. The development of criticism as well as the ideas of some major English critics are discussed in this article.

2. Definition of Literary Criticism :

Generally speaking , criticism means making a judgement about the features or impact of a specific idea, theory , behaviour or situation. Literary criticism refers to a scientific investigation into the domain of literature by making an analysis of the content , the nature and the purpose of the literary text. Thus , the work of the critic is to find out the positive and negative sides of a literary text whether it is in the form of prose or poetry. In fact, literary criticism aims at explaining , analysing and judging literary works on the basis of certain rules and principles such as the unity of the text , its purpose and the degree of pleasure it provides to the readers.

3. Theories of Literary Criticism :

Different theories are established about how to criticize literary works. They are classified into two categories. They involve classical and new forms of criticism.

3.1. Classical forms or theories of criticism :

The following ones constitute the main classical forms of criticism.

3.1.1 Theoretical criticism:

Theoretical criticism existed since the time of Aristotle. It is based on a theory about literature that turns around the usefulness of the literary work. Thus, the purpose of literature is to preserve the moral values of a society.

3.1.2 Relativistic Criticism :

It tries to draw a sort of relationship between the literary work and its readers by using all the means to explain and interpret this work so that to lead to a sort of appreciation to this kind of work.

3.1.3 Applied Criticism :

It is also called practical criticism. It is based on making a discussion of specific works of literature and the evaluation of their authors. It is classified into two types: impressionistic criticism and absolutist criticism. Impressionistic criticism revolves around the critic's impressions about the works of literature. Absolutist criticism (also called judicial criticism) relies on specific principles or rules designed by the critic in order to judge and evaluate the literary work.

3.1.4 Textual Criticism :

It focuses on making comparisons between the original manuscript of a work and its other versions so that to know what was really written by the author and find out the changes or errors made when duplicating this literary work.

3.2 The New Forms or Theories of Criticism :

The new forms of criticism include mimetic criticism , new historicism, reader-response, pragmatic, historical and expressive criticism.

3.2.1 Mimetic Criticism :

It gives importance to the degree to which a literary work reflects reality and truth. It studies the relationship between the literary work and the external reality or the world and people's life .

3.2.2 New Historicism :

It analyses how a literary work will influence a society and its culture. It studies a literary text according to the culture of its community as it is based on the belief that the text constitutes a product of social causes and reflects social effects. It rejects the idea that links a literary work to historical facts and universal truths.

3.2.3 Reader-Response Criticism:

It studies the work according to its readers or audience. It is related to the readers' interpretation and understanding of literary texts. It is concerned with the readers' reactions towards a text by eliciting the different meanings they inferred from it.

3.2.4 Pragmatic Criticism :

Pragmatic criticism analyses the effect of literary texts on its readers. It investigates whether a literary work was able to provide moral instruction and pleasure to the readers or not.

3.2.5 Historical Criticism :

It is related to the author's intention and purpose from writing a literary work by studying the relationship between the historical surrounding and the author's ideas and how the former affected the writings of the latter. In fact, the author is the central element of criticism.

3.2.6 Expressive Criticism :

Expressive criticism studies the text in relation to the author and his way of expressing himself. It considers the text as a result of the writer's imagination and thinking. Thus, it forms an expression of the author's state of mind and vision of life.

4. Types of Criticism :

Literary criticism is characterized by certain changes which occurred in the way of criticizing according to specific periods of time.

Thus, the development of criticism throughout history led to the emergence of three different types of criticism that refer to different points in the history of criticism. They are traditional and new criticism.

4.1 Traditional or Classical Criticism :

Classical criticism has deep roots in history as it existed in the ancient periods mainly through the works of Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. However , classical criticism became known and practised in the seventeenth century. Before this period and specially during the Middle ages, criticism was based on the study of Greek and Roman literary works which were considered as a source for making judgement and evaluating any type of text. However, by the coming of the seventeenth century , critics started to think about judging any literary work according to its own value.

In fact , classical criticism is said to have practically started in the seventeenth century and it stopped to be widely used by the beginning of the first world war. This kind of criticism knew various types of development. In the seventeenth century , it gave importance to the domain of classicism especially because of the renaissance movement which emphasized on the revival of learning by keeping the principles of the past. In this period, criticism focused on the degree of text's imitation to the classical works. Thus , authors were mainly compared to *Homer* and *Virgil* which meant that prose and poetry had to reflect the principles of classicism.

By the end of the eighteenth century , criticism changed its principles because of the appearance of romanticism which focused on the love of nature and breaking the rules of classicism. Thus, critics tried to make comparisons between classical and romantic works. They attempted to adopt the idea that a text represents the thought of the individual who wrote it. Criticism started to design its own rules to become a science in the nineteenth century. In this period, it was also referred to as Romantic criticism. After the first world war, criticism diverged in its way and approach and took the name of New Criticism.

4.2 New Criticism :

By the beginning of the nineteenth century , the ideas of criticism began to change due to the emergence of various literary movements such as Realism , Idealism, Naturalism, Surrealism, Existentialism and symbolism. In this period , criticism focused on the purpose of writing. In fact, the kind of criticism which took place during the fifty years that came after the end of the first world war was called Contemporary criticism.

Thus , this type of criticism continued until the 1960's. It focused on the fact that a writer must reflect the current issues and problems of his society within his works.

Contemporary criticism was a branch of new criticism but it was linked to a specific period. On the other hand, new criticism refers to all the types of criticism made about all forms of literature from the end of the first world war until these days. It got its from John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* (1941).

New criticism ignores the writer's intention and gives more importance to the form of the text and its interpretation. However, this form of criticism became less dominant in the 1980's because of the emergence of a different kind of criticism called 'Literary Theory' which judges a text according to a certain theory established about it by the critic. Nowadays, critics tend to adopt various approaches in order to interpret and study literary works. In this way, there is a sort of eclecticism that combines ideas of both traditional and new criticism so that they may not only judge the text's structure but also the author's purpose.

5. A Comparison Between Traditional and New Criticism :

Both classical and new criticism aim at providing interpretations about literary works. However, they use different approaches to reach this purpose. Classical criticism gives great importance to classical works. It focuses on the readers impressions about the literary text. It also

attempts to search for writer's intention as well as the impact of his moral state and social situation on his works.

On the other hand, new criticism puts the stress on the study of the text by analysing the metaphors, simile and rhetoric. It makes a comparison between the form and the meaning of the text so that to evaluate if their combination is successful in conveying the message meant to be expressed.

In new criticism, the critic explains and interprets the text for the reader while in the classical one, the critic relies on the individual interpretations of the readers. In fact, new criticism studies the literary work according to its own value.

6. English Criticism :

Criticism in England existed for a long time. However, it flourished in the middle of the eighteenth century. There was a group of critics who attempted to establish rules for this task. Ahmed Amine, the Egyptian writer, says that English critics "...tried to transform criticism into an organized science that has rules and principles."¹

The majority of these critics were poets. Among those who had a great impact on English criticism, one lists the following critics.

6.1 Thomas Gray (1716-1771) :

Gray contributed in developing English criticism as he made innovations in this field. He mastered the French and Italian languages which led him to get access to the books of criticism dealing with criticism in such societies. He wrote a book entitled *The Letters* (1742) in which he stated that French should be the language of the epoch as its literature was depicting the poetic soul. He illustrated the negative sides of the poetry of his period so that he paved the way for the poetic innovations made by Wordsworth later on. He also believed that the novel was an important literary genre. In one of his letters of 1756, he affirmed that the poetic style of lyrics constituted the best form of poetry. He added that the beauty of poetry existed in its form. Gray also wrote a book entitled *The Observation* in which he criticized Plato. He was both a poet and a critic who establish a basis for the new literary criticism.

6.2 William Hazlitt (1778-1830)

He is a great English author and critic. He used to write articles in newspapers and periodicals. He was acquainted with Wordsworth and Coleridge. He was fond of reading literature and speaking about its usefulness. He focused on criticizing English authors and poets. However, he was known by a certain degree of subjectivity in judging the literary men towards whom he had a certain prejudice. However, he provided various rich information in the field of criticism.

Hazlitt has made criticism that can be classified into two categories. He produced general criticism related to the analysis of English literature including his dissertations about English poets as a whole by distinguishing between whether the works could be considered as poetry or not. The second type of his criticism involved making judgements about a particular author, poet or a specific literary text.

6.3 William Wordsworth (1770-1850):

Wordsworth is not only a famous poet but he is also a great critic. He attempted to establish certain rules for English poets. In his introduction to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballad* (1798), written in collaboration with Coleridge, which was published in 1800, Wordsworth states that there is need for a common speech within poems. He adds that a poet should use a single style and that a good poetry should reflect strong human feelings. He also criticized one of Gray's poems stating that the part in which Gray used a language similar to that of prose was the only one that deserved appreciation.

Wordsworth's famous work, *The Prelude* (1850), reflects his ideas in life and led to the birth of a new genre of poetry. He tried to call for the return to nature as he describes it in one of his poems in *The Prelude* (book eighth) when he says :

And all the landscape endlessly enriched
With waters running, falling or asleep²

According to many critics, Wordsworth had a sensitive and a creative soul as he reflected his feelings and imagination through poetry

which “ develops the ethical, imaginative and emotional sides of our nature”³

For the new critics , Wordsworth does not reflect the reality of his society as he escaped to nature. Also , he uses metaphor too much which leads his style to be vague. Some critics think that Wordsworth’s criticism was not totally based on logic .

6.4 Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) :

He was both a poet and a critic. He was a friend of Wordsworth. His first criticism was made about Wordsworth’s ideas about poetry. on the contrary of Wordsworth, Coleridge stated that poetry should possess its own language and style. In 1817, he published a book entitled *Biographia Literaria* which contains his finest literary criticism.

Coleridge states in his book that poetry must be able to attract the readers’ attention through real description of society and nature by providing a mixture between reality and imagination. He adds that the main purpose of poetry is pleasure not truth.

Coleridge also made a comparison between the poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the poetry of his period. Then , he criticized the poetry of Wordsworth. Coleridge , thus, provided a basis for new criticism as he focused on analysing both the positive and negative aspects of literary works. He also made lectures about Shakespeare.

Coleridge was addicted to Opium. This fact affected some of his writings. According to Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859) , an English author, Coleridge used Opium as a source of luxurious sensations.

6.5 Mathew Arnold (1822-1888):

He is one of the greatest English Victorian authors. He is also a critic and a poet. The poetry of Arnold was affected by classical poetry since he mainly liked the Greek one. According to Arnold, good poetry is the one that is objective in the sense that it is not characterized by individualism that focuses on the writer’s self.

He wrote books about life and literature. He published *Lectures On Translating Homer* in 1861 , *Essays On Criticism* in 1865 and *Mixed Essays* in 1879.

Arnold considered literature as criticism of life. He established two rules for literary criticism. The first one is the choice of the subject. The second element refers to the importance of classical works especially the Greek and Roman literature.

Arnold's *Essays In Criticism* was written in two volumes. The first volume is entitled ' *The Function of Criticism at The Present Time* '. In it , he affirms that criticism provides a remedy for the weaknesses of English literature. The second volume is called 'Influence of Academies'. In it , he speaks about the importance of establishing academies of criticism similar to those that existed in France so that to improve the level of English critics. He also urges critics to make comparative criticism of the different literatures of the world.

7. Conclusion :

This article attempted to provide general information about literary criticism and the impact of English critics on the English criticism. Generally speaking , the purpose of criticism is to interpret and judge a literary work. Although new criticism focuses on the structure of the text , it is believed that the role of the critic is to help the readers to understand the literary work. However, one can not claim that all what is said by a critic is true because he deals with the field of literature which is related to the human behaviour and feelings that can not be totally traced and interpreted.

A literary work remains the author's own possession that shapes his thoughts and ideas which may be explicit or vague. This will lead to a certain distinction in the interpretations made by the readers and those made by the critics. Thus, criticism may be subjective in certain cases.

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