

**Level: M1 (Civ & Lit)****Lecture : Introduction to Literary Criticism****1. Definition and Nature of Literary Criticism:**

Literary criticism, the reasoned consideration of literary works and issues. It applies, as a term, to any argumentation about literature, whether or not specific works are analyzed. Plato's cautions against the risky consequences of poetic inspiration in general in his Republic are thus often taken as the earliest important example of literary criticism.

More strictly construed, the term covers only what has been called "practical criticism," the interpretation of meaning and the judgment of quality. Criticism in this narrow sense can be distinguished not only from aesthetics (the philosophy of artistic value) but also from other matters that may concern the student of literature: biographical questions, bibliography, historical knowledge, sources and influences, and problems of method. Thus, especially in academic studies, "criticism" is often considered to be separate from "scholarship." In practice, however, this distinction often proves artificial, and even the most single-minded concentration on a text may be informed by outside knowledge, while many notable works of criticism combine discussion of texts with broad arguments about the nature of literature and the principles of assessing it.

Criticism covers all phases of literary understanding, though the emphasis will be on the evaluation of literary works and of their authors' places in literary history. For another particular aspect of literary criticism. It differs from textual criticism and literary based on their nature and functions. textual criticism, the technique of restoring texts as nearly as possible to their original form. Texts in this connection are defined as writings other than formal documents, inscribed or printed on paper, parchment, papyrus, or similar materials. The study of formal documents such as deeds and charters belongs to the science known as "diplomats"; the study of writings on stone is part of epigraphy; while inscriptions on coins and seals are the province of numismatics and sigillography. Textual criticism, properly speaking, is an ancillary academic discipline designed to lay the foundations for the so-called higher criticism, which deals with questions of authenticity and attribution, of interpretation, and of literary and historical evaluation. This distinction between the lower and the higher branches of criticism was first made explicitly by the German biblical scholar J.G. Eichhorn; the first use of the term "textual criticism" in English dates from the middle of the 19th century. In practice, the operations of textual and "higher" criticism cannot be rigidly differentiated: at the very outset of his work a critic, faced with variant forms of a text, inevitably employs stylistic and other criteria

belonging to the “higher” branch. The methods of textual criticism, insofar as they are not codified common sense, are the methods of historical inquiry. Texts have been transmitted in an almost limitless variety of ways, and the criteria employed by the textual critic—technical, philological, literary, or aesthetic—are valid only if applied in awareness of the particular set of historical circumstances governing each case.

An acquaintance with the history of texts and the principles of textual criticism is indispensable for the student of history, literature, or philosophy. Written texts supply the main foundation for these disciplines, and some knowledge of the processes of their transmission is necessary for understanding and control of the scholar’s basic materials. For the advanced student, the criticism and editing of texts offer an unrivalled philological training and a uniquely instructive avenue to the history of scholarship; it is broadly true that all advances in philology have been made in connection with the problems of editing texts. To say this is to recognize that the equipment needed by the critic for his task includes a mastery of the whole field of study within which his text lies; for the editing of Homer (to take an extreme case), a period of some 3,000 years. For the general reader, the benefits of textual criticism are less apparent but are nevertheless real. Most men are apt to take texts on trust, even to prefer a familiar version, however, debased or unauthentic, to the true one. The reader who resists all change is exemplified by Erasmus’s story of the priest who preferred his nonsensical mumpsimus to the correct sumpsimus. Such people are saved from themselves by the activities of the textual critic.

Compared to literary theory, literary criticism and the former are two important terms that we encounter in literary studies. There are varying views on the difference between literary criticism and literary theory; some scholars use these two terms to describe the same concept whereas some other scholars consider literary criticism as the practical application of literary theories. In this article, we are considering the latter perspective. Literary criticism is the study, evaluation and interpretation of literature whereas literary theory is the different frameworks used to evaluate and interpret a particular work. This is the main difference between literary criticism and literary theory. Literary criticism is the study, analysis, evaluation and interpretation of literature. In other words, it judges the value of a work. In literary criticism, a particular work or a body of work is evaluated according to its aesthetic value, historical/cultural/social significance of the work, use of language, and insights and insights of the work. These qualities are often mutually dependent or inflective. On the other hand, literary theory is understanding the nature, and function of literature and the relation of text to its author, reader, and society. It can be described as the frame (tool) that supports literary criticism. The

literary theory consists of a variety of scholarly approaches to evaluate a study. In simple terms, they can be described as the different perspectives or angles scholars use to evaluate literature.

## **2. Functions of Literary Criticism:**

The functions of literary criticism vary widely, ranging from the reviewing of books as they are published to systematic theoretical discussion. Though reviews may sometimes determine whether a given book will be widely sold, many works succeed commercially despite negative reviews, and many classic works, including Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), have acquired appreciative publics long after being unfavourably reviewed and at first neglected. One of criticism's principal functions is to express the shifts in sensibility that make such revaluations possible. The minimal condition for such a new appraisal is, of course, that the original text survived. The literary critic is sometimes cast in the role of scholarly detective, unearthing, authenticating, and editing unknown manuscripts. Thus, even rarefied scholarly skills may be put to criticism's most elementary use, the bringing of literary works to the public's attention.

The variety of criticism's functions is reflected in the range of publications in which it appears. Criticism in the daily press rarely displays sustained acts of analysis and may sometimes do little more than summarize a publisher's claims for a book's interest. Weekly and biweekly magazines serve to introduce new books but are often more discriminating in their judgments, and some of these magazines, such as *The (London) Times Literary Supplement* and *The New York Review of Books*, are far from indulgent toward popular works. Sustained criticism can also be found in monthlies and quarterlies with a broad circulation, in "little magazines" for specialized audiences, and in scholarly journals and books.

Because critics often try to be lawgivers, declaring which works deserve respect and presuming to say what they are "really" about, criticism is a perennial target of resentment. Misguided or malicious critics can discourage an author who has been feeling his way toward a new mode that offends received taste. Pedantic critics can obstruct a serious engagement with literature by deflecting attention toward inessential matters. As the French philosopher-critic Jean-Paul Sartre observed, the critic may announce that French thought is a perpetual colloquy between Pascal and Montaigne not in order to make those thinkers more alive but to make thinkers of his own time more dead. Criticism can antagonize authors even when it performs its function well. Authors who regard literature as needing no advocates or investigators are less

than grateful when told that their works possess unintended meaning or are imitative or incomplete.

What such authors may tend to forget is that their works, once published, belong to them only in a legal sense. The true owner of their works is the public, which will appropriate them for its own concerns regardless of the critic. The critic's responsibility is not to the author's self-esteem but to the public and to his own standards of judgment, which are usually more exacting than the public's. Justification for his role rests on the premise that literary works are not in fact self-explanatory. A critic is socially useful to the extent that society wants, and receives, a fuller understanding of literature than it could have achieved without him. In filling this appetite, the critic whets it further, helping to create a public that cares about artistic quality. Without sensing the presence of such a public, an author may squander his/her talent in sterile acts of defiance. In this sense, the critic is not a parasite but, potentially, someone who is responsible in part for the existence of good writing in his own time and afterward.

Although some critics believe that literature should be discussed in isolation from other matters, criticism usually seems to be openly or covertly involved with social and political debate. Since literature itself is often partisan, is always rooted to some degree in local circumstances, and has a way of calling forth affirmations of ultimate values, it is not surprising that the finest critics have never paid much attention to the alleged boundaries between criticism and other types of discourse. Especially in modern Europe, literary criticism has occupied a central place in the debate about cultural and political issues. Sartre's own *What Is Literature?* (1947) is typical in its wide-ranging attempt to prescribe the literary intellectual's ideal relation to the development of his society and literature as a manifestation of human freedom. Similarly, some prominent American critics, including Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling, Kenneth Burke, Philip Rahv, and Irving Howe, began as political radicals in the 1930s and sharpened their concern for literature on the dilemmas and disillusionments of that era. Trilling's influential *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) is simultaneously a collection of literary essays and an attempt to reconcile the claims of politics and art.

Such a reconciliation is bound to be tentative and problematic if the critic believes, as Trilling does, that literature possesses an independent value and a deeper faithfulness to reality than is contained in any political formula. In Marxist states, however, literature has usually been considered a means to social ends and, therefore, criticism has been cast in forthrightly partisan terms. Dialectical materialism does not necessarily turn the critic into a mere guardian of party doctrine, but it does forbid him to treat literature as a cause in itself, apart from the working

class's needs as interpreted by the party. Where this utilitarian view prevails, the function of criticism is taken to be continuous with that of the state itself, namely, the furtherance of the social revolution. The critic's main obligation is not to his texts but rather to the masses of people whose consciousness must be advanced in the designated direction. In periods of severe orthodoxy, the practice of literary criticism has not always been distinguishable from that of censorship.

**References:**

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