



**Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research**

**University Echahid Hamma Lakhdar, El-Oued**

**Department of English Language**

## **Literary Criticism : an Introduction**

**Teacher: Dida Nassireddine**

dida-nassireddine@univ-eloued.dz

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## **Introduction:**

To be a critic, one must pay attention to the process of reading and interpretation. These underlying mechanisms imply that the mind is fully engaged and demands answers to some questions that impose themselves on the reader such as philosophical, psychological, cultural, ideological ones. Even if we are equipped with systematic methods to interpret texts, we appear to have emotional reactions to the literary works we read. Students or readers will give different interpretations to the same text. They will certainly interpret it without having any training in literary criticism or formal study of literary movements. So, the concern of literary criticism is this natural process of opening literary works to broad interpretations based on personal expectations and experiences. The moment a reader responds to a text, he or she is practicing criticism.

### **I. What is Literary Criticism?**

Literary criticism is that experience when we analyse, evaluate, and explain a literary text: “Literary criticism is a disciplined activity that attempts to study, analyze, interpret, and evaluate a work of art. ( Bressler, 6). We should also notice the fact that literary criticism helps us further our understanding of our humanity and culture; because, when analyse the text, we construct its meaning through the exploration and evaluation of other people’s identities, ideology, history, etc. It functions as an apparatus that lays bare all these aspects of life. Therefore, when we read a text, we need to consider all these basic questions:

1. Does the text have only one meaning?
2. Does the text have a didactic function, namely trying to teach us something?
3. Should the text be read only for pleasure?
4. Does the text influence its readers in the same way?
5. Does the writer include any ideological or cultural implications?
6. How do our personal feelings affect our interpretations of the text?
7. How does the text represent gender?

As all subjects, literary criticism requires that we have theoretical and practical methods. Regarding the former, it concerns itself with the norms, principles and

standards with which we formulate a theory that helps us judge the value and nature of a work of art. Theoretical criticism dates back to the literary tradition of Aristotle's *Poetics* 4<sup>th</sup> BC. The latter, however, focuses on how the principles and tenets of theoretical criticism implicitly control our interpretation, evaluation and analysis of a literary text. It uncovers all underlying concepts and assumptions that may influence the process of reading and understanding of a text. To recap:

Theoretical criticism proposes an explicit theory of literature, in the sense of general principles, together with a set of terms, distinctions, and categories, to be applied to identifying and analysing works of literature. (Abrams, 67).

However,

Practical criticism (known also as applied criticism) then applies the theories and tenets of theoretical criticism to a particular work. (Bressler, 7)

### **Traditional Types of Literary Criticism**

Traditional literary criticism, both theoretical and practical, can be influenced by one of the following movements:

#### **1. Mimetic Criticism:**

This type of criticism is oriented by its emphasis on the view that a literary work is an imitation of life, a truthful and adequate representation of the outside world. It was first originated by Plato and enhanced by Aristotle later.

#### **2. Pragmatic criticism:**

This style of criticism aims to examine the artistic strategies the author adopts and uses in his or her literary works to produce certain effects. Here, we notice that the ends are more important than the means. The judgement of the importance of any work of art depends on its success in providing some effects or purposes such as artistic pleasure, instruction, emotional reactions etc. There must be aims to pursue, for the writer; and targeted ends to mark, for the reader (Abrams 69).

### **3. Expressive criticism**

It is an author-based criticism, that is, we analyse a work of art with reference to the author's life and attitudes. In this type, the critic carefully traces the presence of the author's unconscious desires, mind, character, inclinations, etc. Traditionally, the author is viewed by romanticists as the only source of meaning, implying that the text has a fixed meaning linked to the author's intentions (Abrams 69).

### **4. Objective criticism**

This type stresses the exclusion of the backdrop of the author's life from the analysis of a work of art and encourages readers and critics to avoid personal involvement in the process of interpretation. It addresses the argument that the text is detached from all external factors that influence our interpretation. The text has closed "intrinsic" boundaries and is self-sufficiently autonomous. In his book *Criticism of Aesthetic Judgment*, Kant framed the principles of self-sufficiency, which contributed to the creation of the notion of *art for art's sake* (Abrams 70).

## **II. What is Literary Theory?**

Before explaining what theory is, for example, we need to refer to the short story of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings". While we are reading the story, the text brings our consciousness back to other stories or personal responses. We are tempted to build arguments and theoretical frameworks about the similarity between our reality and an event or condition in the story. For example, we question the indifference to and triviality of an important event such as the fall of an angel or demon, such as the fall of the winged old man, who is treated as an ordinary person. Pelayo and his wife Elisenda cage him like an animal. To many, this terrible incident may be insulting and irritating. To others, however, it is amusing and bizarre. Our critical reading of this incident is based on our past experiences outside the text.

Thus, literary theory explains why we react in such ways when we read a text. It shows us how we have interpreted the text and why we favour some interpretations over others. It identifies the intrinsic factors that orientate our interpretations:

How we arrive at meaning in fiction is, in part, determined by our experiences. Consciously or unconsciously, we have developed a mind-set or framework that accommodates our expectations when reading a novel, short story, poem,

or any other types of literature. In addition, what we choose to value or uphold as good or bad, moral or immoral, beautiful or ugly within a given text actually depends on this ever-evolving framework. When we can clearly articulate our personal philosophical framework when reading a text and explain how this mind-set directly influences our values and aesthetic judgements about a text, we are well on our way to developing a coherent, unified literary theory—the assumptions (conscious or unconscious) that undergird our understanding and interpretation of language, the ways we construct meaning, and our understanding of art, culture, aesthetics, and ideologies. (Bressler, 8)

### **III. The difference between literary criticism and theory:**

While literary criticism stresses the analysis of a text, literary theory focuses on our understanding of and the connection between ideas, assumptions, and perceptions on which we centre our criticism. Etymologically, the word theory (Gk. *Theoria*) means “view or perspective of the Greek stage” (9). It broadens our outlook on life. Literary criticism is the reaction or effect produced when we read a text; when we clarify why we view the text the way we do, it is literary theory. Literary theory helps us question our innocent interpretation of the text.

#### **Questions of Literary Theory: Examples**

- What is the meaning of human history ?
- How do we construct the past?
- What is death and how and why it happens?
- What is the true purpose of human existence?
- How do we represent reality?

#### **References:**

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