

**A History**  
**of**  
**Literary Criticism**

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## **Introduction**

Why history of literary criticism? Having a fair understanding of critical approaches, when it comes to study the history of literary criticism, most students of literature are faced with such a question. This seems, in fact, to be a pertinent question. In other words, how Plato's formulation of literature as a philosopher who totally rejected literature would be of some relevance? Or how literary principles of a critic such as John Dryden would be appropriate when they are regarded as obsolete or Matthew Arnold's critical views would make sense while they are considered more or less off the chart? These questions and possibly more are the dilemmas that I am addressing in these few pages of the introduction in order to justify the significance of this course. As such, I would like to continue my argument with David Daiches' advice who maintains that, "It is little use stuffing one's head with ideas of what this critic said or that critic believed if one cannot see clearly in what area of critical activity each critic is operating. Or, to put it another way, it is no use learning a series of answers if one does not know what the questions were" (Daiches vii).

History of literary criticism offers a perspective on different views of literature. That is, through this survey, we are exposed to a wide spectrum of readership. Such a perspective is invaluable not just because we are students of literature but because we learn about the nature of critical questions and get involved in their dilemmas. This review, for instance, reveals how early critical responses were merely based on a representational aspect of literature. That is, literature was evaluated to the extent that it imitates reality/nature. Such a response was pervasive as it began with Plato and

persisted up to the end of Augustan age. Later, however, new questions and new priorities replaced the old. It appears that ancient schemes of thought lost their credibility and, in one word, were not applicable any more. With the emergence of Romanticism, another aspect of literature was studied; the creative process of writing and the writer's imagination became the major concern of the critics. In the new critical formulation's shift from 'representation' to 'imagination', Romantic writers attempted to respond to the imaginative recreation of reality. The review of history of literary criticism, however, reveals that the expressive aspect of literature does not last either. Later, we come to not a sudden shift of interest in modern era and all the historical factors that pave the way for objective outlook. In the twentieth century, with literary criticism becoming an academic subject on the one hand and involving other disciplines such as philosophy, psychoanalysis or linguistics into its domain on the other hand marks its interdisciplinary nature. Though literary criticism occasionally paid attention to its practical aspect, it never led to a purely objective approach. It was with the New Critics, though, that objective criticism began. That is, the text and nothing but the text forms the dominant discourse of the time and consequently a lot of critical schools were formed that merely examine language of the text. Literary language, in other words, becomes the site of investigation only as a structure rather than a means of representation, expression or its effect.

In this perspective, it appears, then, that literary critics in formulating literature primarily attempt to answer two major questions: 1) What is literature? 2) What is its function? In other words, every critic defines the nature of literature based on his own viewpoint and creates a special framework for it to function. Studying history of literary criticism, thus, provides us with a perspective that offers a variety of definitions and functions of literature. With such an overview, we can see the ups and downs of literary criticism. Such a wide spectrum of responses clarifies the reason

certain views on literature were totally abandoned and certain critical principles were prioritized over others. Furthermore, we have to bear in mind that literature and its criticism are correlated. In other words, they are both product the same hegemony and cultural structure and deeply affect one another. When a new style of poetry is, therefore, introduced by Wordsworth, nineteenth century Romantic criticism is devising a new formulation of literature that not only embraces it but replaces the traditional conception of literature. In other words, it was with the outburst of Romantic literature that expressive theory of literature was inaugurated. Likewise, post-structuralist views are being practiced at a time that literary pieces play with language and reveal its irrepresentability. History of literary criticism, therefore, sheds more light on the literary pieces of that period.

Having achieved this perspective, then, we would be able to categorize critics' responses. M. H. Abrams in his *Mirror and the Lamp* explains that a literary work of art is made up of four elements: 1) the literary work itself 2) the writer 3) the reader or audience 4) a subject that depicts reality or nature, a term that was used in the early stages of criticism. Accordingly, he asserts that there would be four ways of approaching a literary text respectively: mimetic, expressive, pragmatic, and objective. Other critics like David Daiches offer a different category. Daiches is more preoccupied with the issue of form and content. After reviewing each critic, he studies their formulas in terms of two dimensions of literature, that is, its formal structure or contextual issues. All in all, the overview of literary criticism leads us to a better understanding of the path it has taken. We would be in a better position to justify its whys and hows. We may not be able to perceive its future but we can definitely explain its present state and the factors which led to its objective attitude.

Finally, I need to explain the objectives of this book. Most books on history of literary criticism are either outdated or too scholarly. To mention only a few, I can refer to Vernon Hall's *A Short History of Literary Criticism*

(1963) and Richard Dutton's *An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (1984) among the first group that do not cover recent theories of criticism. On the other hand, attempts such as David Daiches' *Critical Approaches to Literature* (1987) or Rene Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1970) are too scholarly for the scope of a B. A. course. No need to mention the list of anthologies of literary criticism that are suitable as reference books rather than textbooks. This book, therefore, attempts to offer an updated version of history of literary criticism that is suitable for B. A. students. The book launches on Plato and ends with the most recent poststructuralist critics. However, one of the major objectives of this book is to entice students with a general overview that gives them a perspective into theories of literature. Once this task is successfully performed, the students are advised to link the theories of critics with their literary productions. This shall partly fulfill the scholarly aspect of those books that cannot be covered in a B. A. course; furthermore, it in builds up their analytic reading.

In order to maintain the critical spirit of each era, the chapters are arranged based on periods of criticism rather than individual critics: classical criticism, Renaissance & neoclassical criticism, Romantic & Victorian criticism, Modern and more recent criticism. Like a snapshot, each chapter begins a summary of major points that are later explained extensively in the chapter. To illustrate the ideas and theories of the critics, some key passages of the original texts are quoted. The final part of each chapter is usually where the conclusive part of the chapter appears not just to summarize the arguments but to analyze the position of the critic in terms of his contribution to the history of literary criticism. Moreover, issues such as form vs. content, the mode of criticism and finally the success of its application to different texts are pinpointed. Chapters are provided with a list of questions based on the issues covered. This part intends both to highlight the critical issues for students and to incite their critical thinking through questions that are either general or comparative. A reading list is also added

for further studies. All the references to the literary texts or critics are given within parentheses inside the text.

My special thanks go to Dr. Amir Ali Nojournian for providing me with the most updated sources. I am also grateful to Mrs. F. Parvizi and Mr. Jafari who assisted me carefully in proofreading the text and revising the questions. Last but not the least, *for those who are familiar enough with history of literature, these pages might well serve as an epilogue and for those who are not it provides an overview.* With all the difficulty of this task, it remains for me to say that I hope the students of English Literature find this book informative and enjoyable to read.