

Rethinking Critical Approaches to Literary Criticism and Review

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Abstract

The paper analyses various literary movements in literary criticism as well as identifying the steps for effective critical review. Adopting critical discourse analytical approach, the paper examines approaches to literary criticism and reviews in the context of literary constructions and deconstructions. Based on the discourses, a pluralistic approach to the study of literary criticism is recommended. The pluralistic approach holds the assumption that no approach is all-encompassing hence; a critic should employ a mix of different but related approaches in the art of literary criticism and review.

Keywords: *Criticism, Literary Criticism, Review, Symbolicity*

Introduction

Over the years, literary scholars have defined literary criticism from different approaches based on the nature and direction of its application in literary studies. The dynamic nature of literature makes the study of literary criticism seemingly a difficult aspect of writing. Literature is dynamic since it deals with human beings. Ordinarily, ‘criticism’ as a word in isolation depicts disapproval expressed by pointing out faults or shortcomings. It also means a serious examination and judgment of something. It can be described as a written evaluation of a work of literature. In essence therefore, criticism can be of positive and negative tendencies, but generally it aids in the progress and accessibility of a writer’s literary work. To ‘criticise’, etymologically, meant ‘to analyse’

and ‘to judge’ Literary criticism offers new ways of thinking about literature and about what is involved in reading critically with invaluable role of interpretation. It is therefore briefly explained as an evaluation of good and bad points; a process used to describe, analyse, interpret and judge an art work. A critic’s task is to challenge definitions of literature and criticism that seem too general, too narrow, or unworkable for any other reason. Whatever it is, literary criticism deals with different dimensions of literature as a collection of *texts* through which *authors* evoke more or less fictitious *worlds* for the imagination of *readers* (Hernadi, 2009).

On the other hand, a review informs its audience about a work so that they can determine the appeal of such books such books. It derives its substance from its ability

to make recommendation of a work of art after critical examinations. The effectiveness of literary criticism and review depends largely on the approaches adopted by literary critics.

Literary Criticism

Once criticism is mentioned, the inquiring mind focuses on faultfinding; however, literary criticism is a judgment or opinion on literature and other literary and artistic works. Criticism is the activity of judgment or informed interpretation and, in many cases, can be synonymous with analysis. It is 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. Crews (2009) posits that the term covers 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. A true piece of criticism is meant to engage another person in a process of analysis, interpretation and assessment. Critical argument is a statement or a reason that justifies the thinking that the statement is true.

Britannica Encyclopaedia (2015) explains that the functions of literary criticism vary widely, ranging from the reviewing of books as they are published to systematic theoretical discussion. Literary criticism is a discussion of literature, including description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of literary works. Like literature, criticism is hard to define. One of the critic’s tasks is to challenge definitions of literature and criticism that seem too general, too narrow, or unworkable for any other reason. In assessing a work of literature, a critic pays special attention to one of several aspects: its language and structure; its intended purpose; the information and worldview it conveys; or its effect on an audience. Most good critics steer clear of exclusive interest in a single element.

Abrams (1981) in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines criticism as the study concerned with defining, classifying, analysing and evaluating works of literature. For Kennedy and Diana Gioia, it is inevitable that people will ponder, discuss and analyse the works of art that interest them. It is a standard critical thinking tool that is readily adaptable to the study works you read in the course of pondering, analysing and discussing them. Literary criticism therefore, is the field of

study which systematises that sort of activity, and the various critical approaches to literature.

A literary critic often engages in three activities: describing, interpreting and evaluating literary works. In other words, ‘there is usually a specific relationship between how a critic describes an object and the sort of interpretation the person is pursuing. As a critic evaluates a speech or any other literary work, the criteria for analysis shape the interpretations. It, therefore, implies that a literary critic describes, interprets and finally evaluates or judges discourses and larger-scale communication events.

Rethinking Critical Approaches to Literary Criticisms

The variety of approaches can lead literary critics to examine the same event in different ways. These approaches are often derived from the school of thoughts of their proponents in literary studies. For the purpose of this work, the following approaches are studied:

Formalist Criticism: The formalist criticism originated in ancient times, from Plato’s concept of a *transcendental essence* (Britannica Encyclopedia, 2015), a primary form of that governed all phenomena. It argues

that the essence of art was not in visual reproduction, but in formation construction. Formal criticism occurs because audiences become aware of how important the unfolding of literature – from introduction to intense experience to completion or ending – is to their experience of those discourses. By now, ‘form’ is closely identified with ‘structure’. This literary approach regards literature as a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms. All the elements necessary for understanding the work are contained within the work itself. Of particular interest to the formalist critic are the elements of form – style, structure, tone, imagery etc. A primary goal for formalist critics is to determine how such elements work together with the text’s contents to shape its effects upon readers.

Similarly, DiYanni (1998) posits that formalist critics view literature as a distinctive art, one that uses the resources of language to shape experience, communicate meaning, and express emotion though focus on literary elements such as plot, character, setting, diction, imagery, structure, and point of view. The meaning is so important that the primary method of formalism is a close reading of the literary text, with an emphasis, for example, on a work’s use of metaphor or symbol, its

deployment of irony, its patterns of image or action. The deconstruction of message, therefore is inherent on the ability of the critic to apply appropriate textual analytical devices to understand implied and explicit meanings. The formalist critic explores the central meaning of a literary work through a detailed analysis of the work's formal elements.

Historical Criticism: This approach seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural and intellectual context that produced it – a context that necessarily includes the artist's biography and milieu. A key goal for historical critics is to understand the effect of a literary work upon its original readers. Historical critics approach literature in two ways: (1) they provide a context of background information necessary for understanding how literary works were perceived in their time; (2) they show how literary works reflect ideas and attitudes of the time in which they were written (DiYanni, 1998).

New Historicism: This approach examines texts from numerous perspectives, but all perspectives tend to reflect a concern with the period in which a text is produced and/or read (including contemporary works). New historicists tend to describe the culture of a

period by reading many different types of text and paying attention to many different dimensions of a culture. It argues that no history can be truly objective or comprehensive because history is constantly written and re-written. However, studying the historical context of a work, particularly in contrast with that in which it is read, can illuminate our biases and hopefully enable us to understand the text (and the culture, context, ourselves etc.) better.

Gender Criticism: The gender criticism examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works. Originally, it was an offshoot of feminist movements but today includes a number of approaches including the so-called 'masculinist' approach recently advocated by poet Robert Bly. Ezenwamadu & Orjiakor (2018) posit that the 'masculinist' supports a society, system or country that is ruled or controlled by men. The bulk of gender criticism, however, is feminist and takes a central precept that the patriarchal attitudes that have dominated western thought have resulted, consciously or unconsciously, in literature full of unexamined 'male-produced assumptions.' Feminist criticism attempts to correct this imbalance by analysing and combating such attitudes – by questioning for

examples, why none of the characters in Shakespeare's play *Othello* ever challenged the right of a husband to murder a wife accused of adultery. The feminist criticism tries to correct predominantly male-dominated critical perspective with a feminist consciousness. It places literature in a social context and employs a broad range of disciplines, such as history, psychology, sociology and linguistics to create a perspective that considers feminist issues. Other goals of feminist critics include analysing how sexual identity influences the reader of the text and examining how the images of men and women in imaginative literature reflects or rejects the social forces they have historically kept the sexes from achieving total equality.

Psychoanalytical Criticism: This criticism aims at uncovering the working of the human mind especially the expression of the unconscious. Possibilities include analysing a text like a dream, looking for symbolism and repressed meaning, or developing a psychological analysis of a character. This criticism provides for many critics 'the transition from story analysis to ideological criticism. The important thing to remember is that psychoanalytical criticism 'is a special variety of narrative analysis that interprets the individual, narrativised events or works, and

the cultural tenets in stories to assess the state of the human psyche (Britannica Encyclopedia, 2015).' Three ideas found in the work of Sigmund Freud are particularly useful: the dominance of the unconscious mind over the conscious, the expression of the unconscious mind through symbols (often in dreams) and sexuality as a powerful force for motivating human behaviour. Psychoanalytical criticism can be applied to either the author/text relationship or to the reader/text relationship. According to DiYanni (1998), psychological critics see literary works as intimately linked with their author's mental and emotional characteristics. Critics who employ a psychological perspective do so to explain how a literary work reflects its writer's consciousness and mental world, and they use what they know of writers' lives to explain features of their work. Psychoanalytic critics rely heavily on symbolism to identify and explain the meaning of repressed desires, interpreting ordinary objects and also make use of other psychoanalytic concepts.

Marxist Criticism: This approach examines literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or received, exploring the relationship between the artist and society. It is politically-oriented and Marxist critics insist that all use of

language is influenced by social class and economics. Its ideological emphasis on class, economics, race and power distinguishes this criticism from other forms of literary criticisms. It focuses on the economic and political element of arts, often emphasising the ideological content of literature because Marxist criticism often argues that all art is political, either challenging or endorsing (by silence) the status quo and it is frequently evaluative and judgmental. Nonetheless, Marxist criticism can illuminate political and economic dimensions of literature other approaches overlook. DiYanni (1998) states that Marxist critics examine literature for its reflection of how dominant elite and middle-class/bourgeois values lead to the control and suppression of the working classes. Marxist critics see literature's value in promoting social and economic revolution, with works that espouse Marxist ideology serving to prompt the kinds of economic and political changes that conform to Marxist principles. This form of criticism is concerned both with understanding the role of politics, money, and power in literary works, and with redefining and reforming the way society distributes its resources among the classes. Marxist analyses of novels focus on the relations among classes.

New Criticism: The New Criticism approach evolved from formalist criticism and contends that literature needs have little or no connection with the author's intention, life or socio-historical situations. It suggests that the text is a self-contained entity and that everything that everything needed to analyse the work is contained within the text. New critics also tend to examine the physical qualities of the text in a 'scientific manner' that examines language and literacy conventions (e.g. rhyme, meter, alliteration, plot, point of view etc.). It is similar, though not identical to structuralism in its emphasis on the text itself. The New Criticism believes that 'poetic works were self-contained discourses, where meanings were to be understood, not with reference to the author or other matters outside the works, but as formal relationships between items in them especially images, metaphors, values, shifts in meter or tone.'

Semiotic Criticism: This criticism critiques the use of language, preferably in texts that comment on the nature of sign language. To the Semiotician, language is an arbitrary but shared system of assigned meaning. Critics are concerned about 'meaning' as they had been about 'style'. They recognised that *symbolicity* was central to public communication. *Symbolicity* is the ability of human beings to

create languages from which they then construct social life – relationship – with each other as well as orientations to the outside (physical) and inside (psychological) worlds. Major assumptions of semiotic criticism include (a) symbol systems are both outwardly and inwardly directed social structures, (b) symbols embody people's perception of and reactions towards the world, (c) meaning are framed in various symbol systems, (d) symbol systems are both public and private and (e) meanings are never completely shared.

Deconstruction: This approach to literary criticism suggests that language is not a stable entity and that we can never exactly say what we mean. It rejects the traditional assumption that language can accurately represent reality. Deconstructionist critics regard language as a fundamentally unstable medium – the words 'tree' and 'dog' for instance, undoubtedly conjure up different mental images for different people – and therefore, because literature is made of words, literature possesses no fixed, single meaning. Deconstructionists tend to emphasise not what is being said but how language is used in a text. In applying deconstruction in literary criticism, Encarta (2009) states that in studying a text's formal characteristics, for example, critics usually recognize the variability of performances of

dramatic works and the variability of readers' mental interpretations of texts. In studying an author's purpose, critics acknowledge that forces beyond a writer's conscious intentions can affect what the writer actually communicates. In studying what a literary work is about, critics often explore the complex relationship between truth and fiction in various types of storytelling. In studying literature's impact on its audience, critics have been increasingly aware of how cultural expectations shape experience.

Critical Review: An Overview

A review is the art of evaluation of creative production such as film, music and literature. Okunna and Omenugha (2002) define a review as the 'the assessment of a literary or artistic work which a reviewer does based on the facts available and judgment passed on the work of art. The work of a literary reviewer is to analyse, evaluate, interpret a text and pass objective judgment on the work of art by recommending such literary production or not. According to Kenechukwu (2014), the purpose of a review is to help the reader in determining whether they want to read a literary work or not. Before one reviews a work of art such as poems, drama, novels, music and broadcast

programmes, the reviewer must have accurate picture of that work; otherwise the review is lopsided in accuracy.

Criticism and review are often used interchangeably, however, they are different. Woller & Newson (1985) explain that review and criticism are not the same thing. Most reviews appear in the mass media print and broadcast and are really a form of interpretative reporting. Reviewers cover the industry of art while critics write about art and artists. The mass media especially newspapers usually cannot accommodate critics whose detailed analyses are better suited to specialised magazines.

Warriner (1988) states that ‘critical reviews are written about books, film, broadcast programmes and all forms of creative works. It informs its audience about a work so that they can determine if the work is good and appeals to them. A review should include (a) a brief objective summary of the work’s subject, central theme or story line, (b) discussion of the work’s major points or elements and (c) the reviewer’s judgment of how successfully the work accomplishes its main purpose. The reviewer’s evaluation may be favourable or unfavourable depending on the context and other criteria for judging literary productions.

Approaches to Critical Review

The art of writing a critical review demands that the writer knows significantly about the work under review. A review is distinguished by its ability to pass judgment and recommendation on the work of art. Warriner (1988) lists the following approaches or steps to writing a critical review:

- a. *Identify and limit your subject:* A review should begin by identify the work according to one or more categories such as subject, genre and audience. Next is to summarise the work’s central topic or story line by noting the work’s main sections or scenes. Limit the summary to not more than a paragraph of your review.
- b. *Gather sufficient information on your topic:* Ensure to familiarise with your study area and gather relevant information for the review. Reread all or part of the literary work and take note of specific quotes, incidents or other details that express or support what you will say in your review.
- c. *Organise your information in a logical plan:* Order the summary notes you made and organise your work logically. Evaluate the work’s strengths and weaknesses and overall effectiveness. Watch for diction and analyse the author’s tone of language

in the light of the theme, characterization, plot and setting.

d. *Give your audience an accurate representation of the work:* Truth is important in critical reviews, so include in your review all important elements of the work and be careful to give them proper emphasis so that you do not distort the work's content, style or theme.

e. *Describe any special features of the work:* As you write your review, look for distinctive features of the work under review and state them in clear language.

f. *Give your individual response to the work:* The hallmark of critical review is the ability to pass judgment and make recommendations for or against readership of such literary work. In doing so, avoid simple statements or whether you liked or disliked the work. be specific about why you found the work enjoyable or boring and make adequate recommendations.

Suggested Steps in Writing a Critical Review

(i) Get to know the work by reading the literature carefully and by reading other opinions of the literature. In getting to know the literary work e.g. book, use all the information within the book itself. Also consider the quality and

veracity of these sources and contents of the literary work. Always read the preface or introduction for statements about the book's intentions and/or limitations. As you read, take notes and flag passages that you feel are illustrative of the purpose, theme and style of the work. Note the strengths as well as weaknesses of the work,

(ii) Establish the thesis of your review. Think about what the main point of your criticism will be. Consider the author's intention in writing the book and whether this was achieved.

(iii) Organise your notes into an outline which incorporates your thesis.

(iv) Write the review, including the elements discussed above.

(v) Edit and revise the review before submitting it.

Advancing Critical Discourse Analysis as Methodology in Literary Criticism and Review

Critical discourse analysis has proved a qualitative approach to the study of literary criticism and review. The qualitative critical discourse analysis that has been adopted and developed by constructionists (Fulcher 2010). This approach provides a coherent way of making sense of the world as reflected in

human sign systems including verbal language (Locke, 2004). Mogashoa (2014) posits that critical discourse analysis is primarily positioned in the environment of language and its successes can be measured with a measuring rod of the study of languages. Language can be used to represent speakers' beliefs, positions and ideas in terms of spoken texts like conversations. Texts have different meanings and Critical Discourse Analysis offers a wide range of approaches to understanding literature through text deconstructions. Fulcher (2010) and Looke (2004) identify the following basis of analysis of literature: thematic analysis (which looks at themes), print text analysis (which examines words, signs and symbolic representations) and oral text analysis (which analyses oral literature). Summarily, McGregor (2010) argues that critical discourse analysis tries to unite and determine the relationship between three levels of analysis, namely: (a) the actual text, (b) the discursive practices and (c) the socio-cognitive interface between dominance and production.

The adoption of critical discourse analysis is apt because literature reviews and theory and review papers may be a major source from which ideologies are reproduced and hegemonies established and maintained

(Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) and critical reactions to CDA center on issues of interpretation and context by examining the use of language functions in different speech communities and to discover patterns either in spoken or written forms as well as their correlation with the societies (Hamuddin, 2015). A critic and reviewer are saddled with mainly the work of text deconstruction with the intent of extracting both implied and explicit meanings. The adoption of critical discourse analysis in critical review supports the position of Wall, Stahl & Salam (2015) that a critical review should be viewed as an attempt to identify taken-for-granted assumptions and propose other assumptions. It is unlikely that any researcher will be able to identify all possible positions that should be considered, and a researcher's judgments will be based on that individual's experiences and beliefs. Therefore, the ideas proposed in a critical review should be critiqued and debated as the discipline addresses the issues raised in it.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Literary criticism helps to describe, interpret and assess aspects of communication messages and processes them systematically within stipulated socio-cultural, economic and political contexts. The approaches to literary criticism are purely individualistic and depend

on choice of the writer and socio-cultural factors surrounding the approaches. We examine these literary works based on contents, structure and ideas and conformity to the prevailing stipulations of the generally accepted mode of assessments. The recommendation is a case for pluralism of literary criticism. It is undoubtedly that criticism is pluralistic in more than one sense of that word as it can be executed in multiple ways and what we identify as discrete methods or approaches can be mixed rather being studied singly. This suggestion for a pluralistic approach to the study of literary criticism hinges on the assumptions that (a) no mission or no approach is work anything until the critic

argues that is. The various missions and approaches to criticism are valuable in specific projects because *you*, and *you* alone, can convince readers that they are. Criticism is pluralistic because the critic has the obligation to demonstrate to audiences that his arguments about messages are engaging and worthwhile and (b) the critic must be able to demonstrate that his critical analyses are significant, relevant and coherent if the critic expects readers to them seriously. On the other hand, reviews suggest the quality and content of a story being reviewed. The identification of the quality and content is its ability to make objective evaluation and recommendations of the literary works.

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