

Fundamentals
of
Criticism
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What is Criticism

- Oxford New English Dictionary defines Criticism as “the art of estimating the qualities and character of literary or artistic work”
- Dryden`s definition of criticism as “a standard of judging well” and Dowden`s as “the effort to see things as they are, without partiality, without obtrusion of personal liking or disliking”.
- The American dictionary, Webster`s New International, defines criticism as “the art of judging or evaluation with knowledge and property the beauties and faults of works of art or literature”.

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- Dictionary of World Literature defines criticism as “the conscious evaluation or appreciation of a work of art, either according to the critics personal test or according to some excepted aesthetic ideas.
- In Encyclopaedia Britannica Edmund Gosse defines criticism as “the art of judging the qualities and values of an aesthetic object, whether in literature or the fine arts”.

- The admission that **analysis or investigation** may be the role of criticism has been emphasized by a number of modern critics, though they do not completely rule out the judgment part of it.
- In the function of Criticism J. Middleton Murray says:

“The Critic has **not merely the right, but the duty to judge** between Homer and Shakespeare, between Dante and Milton....The function of true Criticism is to establish a **definite hierarchy among the great artist of the past**. As well as to test the production of the present”.
- But at another place he admits the existence of another important type of criticism, which is **analysis of poetic method, an investigation and appreciation of the means** by which the poet communicates his intuitive comprehensions to an audiences.

- The literary judge **uses evaluative terms freely** and by preferences he will not hesitate, for instance, to speak of the ‘decay’ of the later Jacobean drama based on the perception that it is a new species, qualitatively different from the drama which immediately preceded it.
- The scientific critic, like the physicist or sociologist, **does not commit himself to assertions of goodness or badness.** He accepts object of his study as what it is and tries to comprehend it by analysis.
- In the classical period as well as after the renewal of the critical enquiry after the Renaissance, it was generally believed that **criticism meant measuring literary works against accepted principles of aesthetic, rhetorical and moral property.**

- Thus Moulton`s repudiation of this narrow view of criticism was overdue, and it was followed by many other critics, like Spingram in 1910 when he wrote: “All sincere reflection upon a text is criticism of a sort, and the best criticism is just that reflection carried as far as it can go”.
- The critic should give primary importance to the literary work he is studying, and subordinate his own personality to it.
- The business of a critic is not to interpret his own personality, but that of the author.

- This definition excludes **neither judgment nor analysis but brings about a compromise between the two.** Judgment is essential to criticism because an intelligent analysis obviously depends greatly on the exercise of judgment.
- Thus a comprehensive, catholic and neutral definition of criticism can be that **it is the full evaluated** understanding of literature.

Functions of criticism

- The critic is considered to be the **law-giver** whose business is **to instruct** the writers, and **lay down certain rules** which they must follow.
- The opposite view is that the function is **to interpret and analyse the work of art** and **compare it with others** instead of being the law-giving authority
- The renaissance critics of Europe who revived the criticism of Aristotle and Horace, believed that the **function of criticism is teach the writers how to write.**
- This was a danger to the creative writers as seen in the comparison of Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde and Spenser's The Faerie Queene.
- Chaucer was not dominated by any critical dogma which he must follow.

- Chaucer absorbed whatever is required and then let his imagination work resulting into invention of entirely new method of story- telling in which character and incidents are welded in such an admirable way that it may considered new in English Literature.
- Spencer was occupied by pre-conceived notion of the pattern of ancient epic while writing The Faerie Queen.
- Though the Farie Queen is a great poem, yet Spencer's imitation of ancient epic and his belief that criticism has some formula that can reach one how to write or even how to construct, has introduced an element of confusion in the otherwise highly artistic masterpiece. **This could be avoided if spencer like Chaucer had kept a more independent attitude to the formal criticism.**

- The study and even imitation of ancient models may help a writer, yet when he is guided, his creative faculty is hampered.
- When he is tempted to discuss them, he senses the danger, and avoids them together.

But how this toun com to destruccion

Ne falleth nought to purpos me to telle;

For it were here a long digression

For my matter, and you to long dwell

- The English poets from 16th to 18th century had not been perplexed with the belief that the critic can instruct the creative writer, the history of English poetry would have been different.

- The criticism resulted into mass of inferior creative writings except *The Paradise lost*.
- Aristotle's notion that a poet can show his worth only in epic or long poem, has wrought great havoc in English poetry for example Drayton's ponderous "Polybin", Tennyson's "Morte de Arthur", Browning's "The ring and the book", Swisburne's Trystom of lyonese.
- Edgar Allan Poe had the courage to say that short poems might have virtues of considerable importance. He said the long poem is a series of poetic movements in which a number of flat and uninterested passages intervene. He described *Paradise Lost* also as a series of minor poems with material that keeps them together.

- In novel, the creative writer works rather in an independent manner in the absence of any formal criticism regarding the novel as it is much younger literary form and did not exist in the time of Aristotle, thus could not formulate any theory about novels.
- When we study novels like Robinson Crusoe, Clarissa Harlowe, Tom Jones, Tristram Shandy, Waverley, Emma, Pickwick Papers, Wuthering heights, The Egoist, Tess, Tono Bugay, what a variety of effect and form is called up by them. If the critics had come first, they would have laid their prescriptions for these novels.

- In modern days, the function of criticism has become to **interpret to less appreciative readers and evaluate a literary composition** indicting what an author has set himself to: how far has he succeeded or fallen short, and what is the final worth of his work: whether the author has succeeded in his aim or not.
- They have looked upon themselves **as defenders of certain literary laws governing poetry, drama, etc which are authoritative in their laws.** This was the claim of renaissance criticism started in Italy and pervaded in entire Europe.

- What is the true function of criticism if we refuse to allow it the claim of rebuking and punishing those who break the rules fixed by Aristotle and the Ancients? **Its function is to interpret the wayward work of a genius,** because it is difficult for an ordinary reader in the present complexity of human nature and life to understand and appreciate when some unknown writer has succeeded in achieving and communicating a new and complex harmony.
- It is only **a trained critic who shows that a harmony has been achieved, and also explain the complexity and the value of the elements of which it is composed.** The perfection of a poem consists in the harmony it has achieved, but its greatness is in to the number and value of the elements plea,
- The Ancient *Mariner* is a perfect poem because of the harmonious presentation of the various elements which constitute this poem, but *The Paradise Lost* is a great poem because in it the has harmonised a much larger number of elements than are found in The Ancient Mariner and which are also more significant.

- It is, of course, **a difficult task which a critic has to perform**, and there are many instances of some serious blunders committed by great critics especially when they are brought face to face with something that is new.
- For example, Crabbe considered Coleridge *The Ancient Mariner*, which is one of the masterpieces of English poetry, as merely an interesting attempt to portray madness not by its effects but by an imitation, “as if a painter to give a picture of lunacy would make his canvas crazy and fill it with wild unconnected limbs and distortion of features, yet one or two limbs are pretty.”
- Some of the older critics considered T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as preposterous because they could not appreciate the teen spirit which the poem embodies.

- In order to perform his **function of analysis and interpretation** successfully a critic should **avoid two tendencies-prejudice and dogmatism**, and the wish to dictate.
- The older critics generally show the former tendency because their taste is formed a new phenomenon makes them not only uncomfortable but too often The younger critics generally show a tendency to denigrate authors who were given an exalted position by older critics, and at time to push on those who were neglected basing their views entirely on grounds of personal appeal.
- For example, Prof. Saintsbury, an older critic, pronounced Shelley the quintessential poet, though he hated Shelley's political and religious sentiments whereas T. S. Eliot, a younger critic, tells us that none can appreciate Shelley who has outgrown adolescence, and that he turn to Shelley only to check a reference.

- In order to perform his function adequately it behoves an **older critic to give a new literary work a careful thought if it makes a strong and an immediate appeal** to a large number of young and able readers as it happened in the case of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Moreover, **the younger entities should not unnecessarily turn their nose against those works and authors whose worth has been established after careful thought by the older critics.**
- As criticism represents the reaction of this or that individual mind or the mind of a period, as Elizabethan, Victorian, etc. to a work of imagination, there is bound to be divergence of opinion. In spite of the great progress that psychology has made this day, as to give criticism can never become so scientific and fool-proof the exact interpretation of a work of art, and reveal a product of Fancy or Imagination. **Critics are the satellites which move around the planets, and they can illuminate, transfigure, and even distort him. But both the poet and the critic light from the sun of beauty and truth, and therefore, both deserve honour.**

Qualities of a Good Critic

- A Good Critic must be a man of wide and varied experience in reading
- A Good Critic must read quite number of inferior author otherwise his standard will be too high.
- A Good Critic must have reflected on his reading and formed the habit of analyzing the impression the reading has on his mind.
- A Good Critic Should not merely be able to criticize the work of others but also criticism his/her own self and his/her own reflection
- A Good Critic must have superior sensibility.
- A Good Critic must have greater capacity of receiving impressions and sensations from the work of art he studies.
- A Good Critic must be able to see what the poet sees, and hear what the poet hears.
- A Good Critic can play many roles. A Good Critic may be the interpreter or the censor. Critic may be elucidator explaining ideas which are obscure or which the author has taken for granted.

- A Good Critic must have the psychological gift both natural and trained, of discovering, to some extent the mind of the author behind the book.
- A Good Critic must have the teaching or communicating capacity.
- A Good Critic must have philosophical mind.
- Macaulay wrote: Hazlitt used to say of himself, 'I am not, If not critical'.
- A Good Critic must have quality of creative imagination which a complete critic must have share with creative artist.

- A Good Critic must also have wide erudition. This would increase his understanding. His mind would be stored with impressions which would be modified and refreshed by each successive impression he receives from the new works he contemplates. In this way would be built up a system of impressions which would enable him to make generalized statements of literary beauty. Such a universalizing or generalizing power is essential for an ideal critic, and he can get it only through erudition.
- A good critic must not be emotional. He must be entirely objective. He must try to discipline his personal prejudices and whims. He must have a highly trained sensibility, and a sense of structural principles, and must not be satisfied with vague, emotional impressions. Critics who supply only vague, emotional impressions, opinions or fancy, as he puts it, are great corruptors of taste.

- An ideal critic must have a highly developed sense of fact. By a sense of fact, Eliot does not mean biographical or sociological knowledge, but a knowledge of technical details of a poem, its genesis, setting, etc. It is a knowledge of such facts alone which can make criticism concrete as well as objective. It is these facts which a critic must use to bring about an appreciation of a work of art. However, he is against the ‘lemon-squeezer’ school of critics who try to squeeze every drop of meaning out of words and lines.
- Comparison and analysis are the chief tools of a critic and so a perfect critic must be an expert in the use of these tools. His use of these tools must be subtle and skilful. He must know what and how to compare, and how to analyse. He must compare the writers of the present with those of the past not to pass judgment or determine good or bad, but to elucidate the qualities of the work under criticism.