

# TRADITIONAL CRITICAL APPROACHES AS INTERPRETATIVE TECHNIQUES IN LITERARY RESEARCH: AN INTRODUCTION

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## **Abstract:**

*The research is a systematic inquiry into the area of research, projected to acquire a new level of understanding and knowledge. It is a journey from the unknown to the known. In literary research a research problem is identified and described, appropriate hypotheses and objectives are formulated; relevant data in the form of primary and secondary sources is collected and systematically analyzed in order to arrive at the findings and conclusions which can either be a revision of the earlier knowledge acquired or addition to it as a new knowledge. The existing knowledge of literary theory and critical approaches is an easy tool at hand to explore the latent content in literary text; its symbolism, themes and motifs, perspectives, authorial intention, characters and characterization, impact on the reader etc.*

*The present paper strives to review major traditional critical approaches that can be used as interpretative techniques to understand literary texts substantially. The specialized knowledge acquired through critical approaches enhances literary appreciation. Such a specialized knowledge is not in itself restraining to the pleasure of literature. In fact, the knowledge of critical approaches and its intelligent application as interpretative techniques can develop the enjoyment of literature. The literary research is interdisciplinary as well as trans-disciplinary in nature as it embarks on the wide-ranging interpretative theories developed in various disciples of pure and applied sciences, social sciences and humanities.*

*The critical theories and approaches offer multidimensional perspectives on the given literary piece of work and enable its readers as well as researchers to obtain total aesthetic and rational experience. Besides textual approach, ample variety of literary theories and critical approaches to literature exist such as historical and biographical, moral and philosophical, formalist, psychological/psychoanalytical, mythological and archetypal, feminism and gender studies, cultural studies, reader-response theories etc. In view of time and space constrains the present paper would pursue examination of the traditional critical approaches to literature i.e. historical and biographical approaches and moral and philosophical approaches.*

**Keywords:** Critical approach, Interpretative technique, Literary research

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## **Introduction:**

The research is a systematic inquiry into a research problem of the area of research



projected to acquire a new level of understanding and knowledge. It is a journey from the unknown to the known. In literary research a research problem is identified, stated and described, appropriate hypotheses and objectives are formulated; relevant data in the form of primary and secondary sources is collected and finally systematically analyzed in order to arrive at the findings and conclusions which either revives the earlier knowledge acquired or adds to it in the form of a new knowledge. The existing knowledge of literary theory and critical approaches is an easy tool at hand to explore the latent content in literary texts, interpret its symbolism, themes and motifs, perspectives, authorial intention, characters and characterization, implication on the reader and linguistic devices.

The present research paper strives to review major traditional critical approaches that can be used to understand literary texts substantially. The specialized knowledge acquired through critical approaches augments literary appreciation. Such a specialized knowledge is not in itself restraining to the pleasure of literature. In fact, such knowledge of critical approaches and its intelligent application as interpretative techniques can enhance the enjoyment of literature. The literary research is interdisciplinary as well as trans-disciplinary in nature as it embarks on the wide-ranging interpretative theories developed in various disciplines of pure and applied sciences, social sciences and humanities.

The critical theories and approaches offer multidimensional perspectives on the given literary piece of work and enable its readers as well as researchers to obtain total aesthetic and academic/rational experience. Besides textual approach there exist ample theories and critical approaches to literature such as historical and biographical, moral and philosophical, formalist, psychological/psychoanalytical, mythological and archetypal, feminism and gender studies, cultural studies, reader-response theories etc. In view of time and space constrains the present paper would pursue the examination of traditional critical approaches to literature i.e. historical and biographical approaches and moral and philosophical approaches.

### **Literary research:**

In scientific research the researchers must select appropriate research methods and methodology in order to conduct his research work in a systematic and objective manner. Similarly, in literary research selecting appropriate critical approach/es as interpretative techniques or strategies to understand a literary work is must. The literary research methods are different from research methods in the pure and applied sciences. The findings and conclusions in the science research can be reproduced again and again, while literary research seldom does so. Literary research often engages itself with the questions of literary interpretations and hermeneutics, social conventions, depictions of lived experience, and artistic implications; answer to these questions generate discourse and different viewpoints rather than one great experiment that settles the problem at hand. In literary research, we may get a variety of valuable and qualitative responses even though they are quite different from one another. Moreover, in literary research there is always scope for further engagements but our claims and arguments need to be more realistic, convincing and all-inclusive.

### **Traditional critical theories as interpretative techniques:**

Critical theories can be broadly categorized into two types such as traditional and modern critical approaches to literature. The traditional critical theories include historical,



biographical, moral and philosophical critical approaches whereas modern approaches involve formalism, new criticism, psychological, mythological, feminism, cultural studies, reader-response criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction etc.

### 1. Historical and Biographical Approaches:

It is one of the oldest approaches to literature as it perceives literary work mainly as a reflection of writer's life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work. The significance of this ever evolving approach since antiquity is best expressed by the French naturalist critic Hippolyte Adolphe Taine in his phrase '**race, milieu, et moment**' which argues about hereditary and environmental determinism. The term 'race' represents cultural and historical context, the 'milieu' signifies the place and the 'moment' indicates time when the text is written. This approach offers a discourse in which the historical events and the contemporary life of the author tend to determine meaning of the literary work and similarly the work itself helps understand the author's life and his contemporary age. Thus, historical and biographical approach to literary text bridges the gap between the reader and world portrayed in the literary work. In this process the reader/researcher understands the work in the light of its historical context keeping aside his own race, milieu and moment.

The medieval poet William Langland's 'Piers Plowman' a famous allegorical poem could best be understood in its historical context as it launches a scorching attack on the social, political and religious evils particularly corruption in all walks of life during the fourteenth century England. Similarly, most of the poetry written by John Milton comments on the events of his life and time, particularly his famous sonnet 'On His Blindness' which could best be understood only when we realize that the poet went completely blind at the time of its composition. Or, the Victorian novelist Charles Dickens's famous historical novel 'Tale of Two Cities' can make better sense only if we take into account its contemporary historical context of the French revolution.

It is a limited view which considers the novel as an appropriate genre to articulate in elaborate manner on the historical and biographical context of the time, and that the poetry is not a suitable medium or the poets are least concerned about the social issues of their time. In fact, since time immemorial it has been believed that the poets are philosophers, historians, teachers and interpreters of their contemporary culture; they have been visionary and prophetic individuals to the mankind. No wonder why in 'A Defense of Poetry', a romantic English poet P. B. Shelly announced that the 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. The pre-romantic poet William Blake's most of the poetry can be meaningfully read only in terms of his contemporary time. For instance, his volume of poetry called 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience' that imitates Milton's mythic world of 'Paradise' and 'Fall' and documents both the 'unfallen world' and the 'fallen world' of his contemporary age England. His songs vividly depicts social issues of his time and severely attacks against child labor, poverty, church and government's indifference and hypocritical religiosity. Similarly, his poem 'London' is also an outcry against the contemporary burning issues such as social inequality, exploitation, child labor, and government's indifference towards soldiers who served their country faithfully. It is very evident, therefore, that the poetry can be read meaningfully in terms of its historical and biographical context.



## 2. Moral and Philosophical Approaches:

Like historical and biographical critical approaches, moral and philosophical approaches can be traced as far back as classical Greek and Roman critics. For a Greek philosopher Plato, for instance, the elements of **morality** and **utility** in art and literature are of paramount importance. A Roman poet/critic Horace emphasized on the **didactic** as well as **artistic** aspects of the literature. And the most prominent exponent of these classical ideas is a neo-classical English critic Dr. Samuel Johnson.

These critical approaches view literature from the philosophical and moral standpoints. According to the above mentioned critics the main function of literature is to teach morality and ethics and to make inquiry into the philosophical issues. The critic applying moral and philosophical approach interprets literature with reference to the philosophical framework of a particular time and society. For example, Alexander Pope's 'Essay on Man' can best be understood against the role of reason and logic prevalent during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Or, Robert Frost's poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' can best be understood only if one understands that duty and responsibility is more important than beauty and pleasure. The Victorian poet/critic Matthew Arnold strongly argued that great poetry develops from sincerity of emotions and feelings. A good poetry possesses qualities of high seriousness, truth of representation and brilliance of poetic language.

Not that the above mentioned critics are only concerned about the moral and philosophical considerations but the fact is that they are rather less concerned about the aesthetic and formalistic aspects of poetry. For them ascertaining whether the piece of work is instructive or not is more important and therefore they want to determine 'what' it teaches. The modern formalistic critics deny the precedence of traditional critical approaches over the modern approaches and therefore, they discard traditional criticism saying that it is deficient in imagination and has ignored the new principles of modern sciences. However, it can be advisable that the researcher can employ both traditional and modern critical approaches if they can help bringing in fresh perspectives, new insights and total aesthetic experience while appreciating a piece of literary work.

### Conclusion:

The literary research is a systematic investigation into a research problem associated with the literary work. It is often exploratory and qualitative in nature and employs different research methodology and techniques from that of the research in pure and applied sciences. In order to deal with the research problem in literature research different critical approaches could be used as interpretative techniques at par with appropriate research methodology. Besides other textual and modern critical approaches, traditional critical approaches as research tools and techniques can also be very fruitful in the entire journey of research.

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