

## FROM CLASSICISM TO POSTMODERNISM: A BRIEF SURVEY OF LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM

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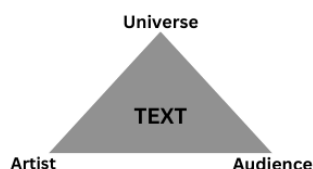
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### Introduction:

American literary critic M. H. Abrams in his famous book 'The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition' metaphorically illustrates the development of romantic approach to literary criticism and reflects on how it is different from other prevalent literary theories. The 'mirror' designates the artist who reflects nature or the external world as it is; while the 'lamp' designates him as an illuminator of the world (inner/outer) under consideration. He argues about four coordinates i.e. universe, text, author and audience that cover the entire history of literary theory and criticism.



On the basis of relationship between these coordinates, he classifies literary theory into four categories/orientations i.e. mimetic theory (highlights text-universe relationship), pragmatic theory (highlights text-audience relationship), expressive theory (highlights text-author relationship) and objective theory (considers text in isolation).

Thus, in view of his orientation of critical theories the following review offers a brief synopsis on major literary theories and theorists from classicism to postmodernism.

### Classicism:

Classical theory of literary criticism derives inspiration from ancient Greece philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Longinus and Roman poet-critic Horace. Classicism is an artistic, literary, philosophic and intellectual movement that emphasizes on simplicity, balance, symmetry, order and adherence to strict rules and regulation in art of classical antiquity. For classicists art and literature is essentially an imitation of life in other words it is mimetic in nature and therefore does not deal with ultimate truth which is divine. In 'Republic' **Plato** (427 - 348 BC) maintains that poetry is thrice removed from reality as it imitates external world/nature which itself replicates the perfect world of divine forms. He illustrates this by giving example of a carpenter who makes a wooden table which is a product of abstract idea of a table in his mind; whereas the artist/painter draws a table on canvas that derives inspiration from carpenter's table. Thus, painters work is further away from reality. Similarly, poets draws inspiration from the external mortal world which is not perfect or immortal. Therefore, Plato rejects poets from his ideal world called 'Republic' as they do not



directly deal with the perfect world of forms or ideas. His disciple, **Aristotle** (384 - 322 BC) in 'Poetics', however defends poetry arguing that "art imitates not the mere shadow of things, but the ideal reality embodied in the very object of the world. The poet does not copy the external world but creates according to his idea of it. Poetry is a creative process giving us the poet's conception of truth. The real and the ideal from Aristotle's point of view, are not opposites - the ideal is the real, shorn of chance and accidents, a purified form of reality. And it is this 'higher reality' which is the object of poetic creation". In short, classicists developed the memetic theory of literature and criticism.

**Cassius Longinus** (213 - 273 AD), a prominent Platonic Greek philosopher and rhetorician who wrote a classic treatise 'On the Sublime' that highlights his theory of aesthetics and the effects of good writing. It is written in an epistolary mode. Through his theory of sublime he promoted qualities of moral excellence, elevated style and simplicity. According to him there are five sources of sublimity i.e. "great thoughts, strong emotions, certain figures of thought and speech, noble diction, and dignified word arrangement" (Leitch, Vincent B. PP- 135-154). The sublime is a quality of expression/style that leads the listeners not to persuasion but to ecstasy. It is an invincible power of a speech that rises above every listener.

**Quintus Horatius Flaccus** (65 - 8 BC) is commonly known as **Horace** was a leading Roman lyric poet-critic-philosopher during the reign of King Augustus. He is known for his elegant odes, satires and epistles primarily his magnum opus 'Ars Poetica' in which he advises poets on the art of poetry and drama. Ars Poetica tremendously influenced writers since it was written through medieval period to renaissance and the modern period. It is a compendium of the rules and regulations to be strictly followed by the upcoming poets. This work was so popular that it was recommended as compulsory text in every school of England during Neoclassical period. Ars Poetica consists of 14 sections, in each of them Horace provides advice for the budding poets from the view point of a successful poet. Unlike Plato and Aristotle who produced their theories from philosophical perspective, Horace develops his theory as a practising poet. In this work he substantially argues about unity and harmony, decorum, *medias res*, authorial purpose, adherence to tradition, consistency, characterization, style and meter, dramatic theory, and poetic genius.

### **Renaissance and Reformation:**

Renaissance is the revival of ancient Greece and Roman knowledge system in 14th and 15th century Italy which gave rise to the philosophy of humanism. Renaissance scholars were known as humanists as the focus of their study was human being therefore, literary theory and criticism was pragmatic in nature. The period saw European scholars taking greater interest in ancient Greeks and Roman writing especially Horace, Aristotle and Plato. The leading theorists of the renaissance includes Lodovico Castelvetro: *The Poetics of Aristotle Translated and Explained*; Philip Sidney: *An Apology for Poetry*; Jacopo Mazzoni: *On the Defense of the Comedy of Dante*; Torquato Tasso: *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*; Francis Bacon: *The Advancement of Learning*; Henry Reynolds: *Mythomystes* etc. The critical discourse of the renaissance primarily consists of defenses of poetry and dialogues on literary language and imitation in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy, which later spread with adaptations and modifications of the classics across European countries in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.



Elizabethan poet- critic **Philip Sidney's** (1554 - 1586) 'The Defence of Poesie or An Apology for Poetrie' is an important contribution to the literary theory of renaissance. In this work Sidney addresses the Plato's charges against poetry and integrates a number of classical and Italian principles of fiction. He asserts that poetry combines both liveliness of history and morality of philosophy and develops quality of virtuousness in its readers. Therefore, poetry is more significant than History or Philosophy. Sidney exerted tremendous influence on later generations of critics especially romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

### **Neoclassicism and Enlightenment:**

Memetic and Pragmatic theories of literature and criticism continue their impact during neoclassicism and enlightenment periods. Neoclassicism, an artistic, literary, cultural and intellectual movement emerged in Italy and spread across European continent, influenced by the classical antiquity. This movement coincided with 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment movement and remained popular until 19<sup>th</sup> century conflicting with new ideas of Romanticism. It was the age of critical inquiry and satire. Major proponents of neoclassicism in English literature were Alexander Pope, John Dryden and Samuel Johnson. They revived classical ideals of mimesis developed by Horace, Aristotle and Plato. This movement emphasizes on simplicity, rationality, precision, balance, symmetry, order and adherence to strict rules and regulation in art of classical antiquity.

**John Dryden** (1631 - 1700) hailed by Samuel Johnson as the father of English criticism. He was appointed as the first poet laureate of England in 1668. He was a well known poet, playwright and critic. His notable critical works include "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy" (1668) in which he discusses the merits and demerits of the different playwrights of his contemporary time, and in "Of Dramatick Poesie, an Essay" (1667) he explores various aspects of dramatic theory and provides a defense of English drama. It presents a dialogue between four characters who discuss the merits of ancient and modern plays.

'An Essay on Criticism' was published by Alexander Pope (1688–1744) in 1711 as a verse essay. Inspired by Horace and didactic in tone, the entire poem is composed in heroic couplet following the tradition of Horatian satiric ode. It takes into account a range of literary ideals of his time that includes good criticism and advice. According to him the good taste is obtained from the nature and wit and that a good critic must imitate the established classical rules. This work became the source of popular sayings in our day-to-day discourse such as "To err is human; to forgive, divine", "A little learning is a dangerous thing", "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread" etc.

### **Romanticism:**

The Romantic English criticism, predominantly expressive in nature, is associated with the **William Wordsworth's** (1770 - 1850) 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads' (1800) and **S. T. Coleridge's** (1772 - 1834) 'Biographia Literaria'. Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry as a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling' breaks the earlier notion of the neoclassical age that the literature is the reflection of reality or imitation of nature and establishes a new formula that the artist and his relation with the work is the center of attention. Thus, literature was now considered as an expression of the poet's mind and not as the mimetic art. For



romantic critics the poet is an inspired genius stands above the society, a prophetic and visionary figure who is uncontrolled by the past and the guide of the future.

The revolutionary nature of the romantic age prompted contemporary poet-critics to propose new ideas about the nature and function of poetry. The romantic theory of poetry was in direct opposition to the 18<sup>th</sup> century neoclassical theories which were imitative of human life and nature. The romantics strongly held that the poetic stimulus lies within the nature and poets mind and spontaneous emotional reaction. Therefore, their poetry exhibits the poet's internal state of consciousness, it made ordinary things or objects look miraculous and natural look supernatural with the help of heightened sense of their power of imagination. Romantic poets and critics gave more importance to the poet's emotions than his logical reasoning. The poetic persona of their works was directly connected with the poet's self for instance autobiographical works such as Wordsworth's 'The Prelude', 'Tintern Abbey', Lord Byron's 'Child Harold', odes of Keats etc.

S. T. Coleridge was one of the greatest English poet-critics who believed that in order to find the truth there must exist both the knower as well as the known in other words presence of the self and the nature as their interaction and synthesis creates the literary work. The created work, however, is neither the self nor the nature but the different entity of its own and that is governed by its own laws. Coleridge is known for his contribution to the theory of imagination. In his 'Biographia Literaria' (1817) he distinguishes between the primary imagination and secondary imagination. For him primary imagination is a mental faculty common to all which helps us to understand the outside world however, secondary imagination is a creative force possessed by the gifted ones. Further he proposes that in literature there is a fusion of elements like poet's emotions and thoughts that is imagination, combination of the universal and the particular, the objective and the subjective, and the general and the specific.

**Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792-1822) in his famous 'A Defense of poetry' (1821) claims that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world who creates high ideals and employ poetry to achieve the platonic world of utopia. He believed that human mind consists of two faculties i.e. the reason and the imagination. His reasoning mind replaces Coleridge's primary imagination and claims that the imagination has a soothing power which pacifies the people and makes them moral beings. According to him poetry as a product of imagination gives aesthetic pleasure and strengthens human morality therefore imagination is both creative and pragmatic. According to him the poets create a good civil society and hence, he places them on the high pedestal of honor.

**John Keats** (1795-1823) was another notable poet-critic of the expressive criticism whose letters (published posthumously in 1848) especially are of immense importance for they consist of his famous critical term 'negative capability'. According to him negative capability is the state of being in which we are "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason... being content with half knowledge". Later he proclaimed that he was "certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of imagination – What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not – for I have the same idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty". (Wikipedia) Thus, John Keats strongly believes in the



imaginative faculty of the human mind which creates truthful world of beauty.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic age there were many other significant literary critics who helped shape the critical ideas of the expressive criticism such as Charles Lamb, John Ruskin, William Godwin, William Hazlitt etc. Thus, the view that literature as the expression of the writer's personality was the dominant perspective of the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic English literature which along with other modern critical approaches continues to influence the present literary writers.

### **Modernism and Postmodernism:**

Modernism and postmodernism are sometimes complementary or sometimes contradictory movements in terms of artistic, literary and philosophical outlook, emerged in different periods. These movements resulted out of different thinking patterns of the societies. Modernism can be viewed as reaction against the ideas of 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian Industrial society and realism. It flourished between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, whereas postmodernism developed after the World War II and flourished through 1970s and 80s. Modernist critical theories focus on the text as an autonomous entity cutoff of external universe whereas postmodernist theories focus on reader/audience as the object of consideration.

### **Major Modernist Critical Theories:**

#### **Russian Formalism and New Criticism:**

Modernist literary theories are predominantly objective in nature. Formalism is a modern literary movement that emphasized form over content of the literary text. In 1920s two offshoots of formalism emerged i.e. Russian formalism and New criticism. In order to evaluate, analyze and interpret a literary text both movements reduced it to its formal or structural features such as literary modes, genres, discourse, and forms including grammar, syntax, literary devices meter and tropes and ignored its authorial, societal and cultural context. Major proponents of Russian formalism were Moscow Linguistic Circle critics i.e. Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky and Yury Tynyanov, Roman Jakobson and Vladimir Propp and structuralists of Prague Linguistic Circle I.e. Roman Jacobson and Ferdinand de Saussure.

New Criticism another offshoot of formalism that developed in America in the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. New criticism emphasized on close reading of the text and conceived text as an independent and autonomous entity cutoff from any outside forces. Chief exponents of new criticism includes I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and W. K. Wimsatt. In 'Practical Criticism', 'The Principles of Literary Criticism' and 'The Meaning of Meaning' **I. A. Richards** (1893 - 1979) proposed objective and scientific analysis of the literary text. **T. S. Eliot** (1888 - 1965) in 'Tradition and Individual Talent' and Hamlet and His Problems' advocates theory of impersonality and objective correlative. William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley respectively developed theory of Intentional fallacy and Emotional fallacy.

### **Psychoanalysis:**

Chief proponent of psychoanalysis was **Sigmund Freud** (1856 - 1939), who





emphasized on individual unconscious which consists of deeply rooted repressed desires and wishes. In his essay titled 'Creative Writers and Day Dreaming' (1907) he argues that literary work is like a 'dream' and the writer as a 'dreamer' who fulfills his repressed desires through his artistic work by way of sublimation. He traced the common string of unconscious wish fulfillment between childhood games, day-dreaming or adolescent phantasy, dreaming and creative work. The important Freudian concepts include Psychosexual development, Unconscious, Preconscious, Consciousness, Id, ego and superego, Ego defenses, Projection, Introjection, Libido, Transference, Countertransference, Resistance, Denial, Oedipus complex, Electra complex etc. Psychoanalysis not only helps understand and cure mental disorders in neurotic patients but also helps critics in navigating and exploring literary genres and mental frameworks of the literary characters (indirectly authors and readers), their hidden motives and desires that drive them to take certain actions in the narrative.

**Carl Jung** (1875 - 1961) a Swiss psychologist, psychiatrist and disciple of Sigmund Freud. Later he diverged from Freudian psychoanalysis as it overemphasized on libido. His contribution to modern psychology is noteworthy, particularly his concept of collective unconscious. According to him human mind shares some mental concepts from a common reservoir of collective human memory from time immemorial called collective unconscious that contains instincts and archetypes. He also developed concepts like individuation, shadow, anima, animus, personal unconscious etc.

Psychoanalysis was later developed by Alfred Adler, Erik Erikson, Karen Horney, Jaques Lacan etc., and it continues to influence other fields of knowledge as well including literature and literary theory.

### **Structuralism:**

In 1960s Structuralism as an intellectual movement flourished in European countries particularly in France based on the principles developed by **Ferdinand de Saussure** (1857 - 1913). His seminal work 'Course in General Linguistics' (1916) laid the foundation of structuralism. Structuralism "interprets elements of human culture by way of their relationship to a broader system. It works to uncover the structural patterns that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel". (Wikipedia) Saussure developed concepts like 'langue', 'parole', 'sign', 'signifier', 'signified', 'binary oppositions' etc. The principles of structuralism can be used to analyze literary work by exploring the underlying structural patterns in the text. Structuralists employed concepts from linguistics, anthropology and psychology to interpret those structural patterns in the text. The word as a sign consists of signified and signifier that refer to different objects and concepts, however, the connection between the word and meaning is arbitrary. Structuralism was later developed by scholars like Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Barthes, and Michel Foucault.

### **Major Postmodernist Critical Theories:**

#### **Poststructuralism and Deconstruction:**

Poststructuralism as an intellectual movement began after 1960 as an opposition to structuralism. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966) and "Of Grammatology" (1967) by **Jacques Derrida** (1930 - 2004) and "The Death of the Author" (1967) by **Roland Barthes** (1915 - 1980) are the key texts of poststructuralism. However, there



is a very thin line of difference between structuralism and poststructuralism as many poststructuralist rejected to be labeled themselves as poststructuralists. "Post-structuralism rejects the structuralist notion that the dominant word in a pair is dependent on its subservient counterpart, and instead argues that founding knowledge on either pure experience (phenomenology) or on systematic structures (structuralism) is impossible, because history and culture actually condition the study of underlying structures, and these are subject to biases and misinterpretations. Gilles Deleuze and others saw this impossibility not as a failure or loss, but rather as a cause for "celebration and liberation." A post-structuralist approach argues that to understand an object (a text, for example), one must study both the object itself and the systems of knowledge that produced the object". (Wikipedia)

Inspired by a Swiss linguist and philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida propounded the theory of deconstruction that suggests the fluidity of language over static forms and that the concept must be understood in the context of its opposite. (Wikipedia)

### Reader Response Theory:

In contrast to the literary theories that emphasized on the form and structure of the text, Reader Response Theory focuses on the reader or audience and aesthetic experience of the text. This literary movement developed in U.S. and Germany during 1960s and 1970s. **Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, and Roland Barthes** are the chief proponents of the theory. "Reader-response theory recognizes the reader as an active agent who imparts "real existence" to the work and completes its meaning through interpretation. Reader-response criticism argues that literature should be viewed as a performing art in which each reader creates their own, possibly unique, text-related performance". (Wikipedia)

### Conclusion:

- Thus, the above critical survey of literary theory and criticism takes major trends and theorists into consideration in view of M. H. Abrams orientation theory of criticism. Unlike theories from classicism to neoclassicism, there has been emergence of practical criticism as well as diverse modes literary schools and movements that shaped the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literary theory and criticism. Due to space constraint the paper highlights only the select major literary movements that dominated the modern and postmodern periods.

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