

## EVOLUTION OF LITERARY CRITICISM: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the historical evolution of literary criticism, tracing its roots from classical antiquity to contemporary theories. Starting with Aristotle's Poetics, it highlights key developments through the Renaissance's neoclassicism, the Romantic emphasis on individual expression, and the emergence of New Criticism in the 20th century. The article examines how various movements, such as structuralism and postmodernism, have shaped modern literary theory, influencing interpretations of texts and authorship. Ultimately, it underscores the dynamic interplay between literature and criticism across different historical contexts, reflecting broader cultural and philosophical shifts.*

**Keywords:** *classical period, medieval criticism, renaissance, enlightenment, new criticism, modernism critical theories, literary criticism.*

### INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism has evolved significantly from its origins in ancient Greece to the complex theories of today. Beginning with foundational texts like Aristotle's Poetics, which introduced key concepts such as mimesis and catharsis, literary criticism has continually adapted to reflect cultural and philosophical shifts. The Renaissance revived classical ideas, while the Enlightenment democratized literature through increased literacy. Various movements, including New Criticism

and post-structuralism, have further shaped the discipline, emphasizing diverse perspectives and methodologies. This article explores the historical progression of literary criticism, highlighting its enduring relevance and transformative nature across centuries.

### **MAIN PART**

Literary criticism has evolved significantly from its origins in classical antiquity to contemporary practices.

#### **Classical and Medieval Criticism**

Aristotle's *Poetics* (4th century BC) introduced key concepts like mimesis and catharsis, shaping early criticism. Medieval criticism focused on religious texts, influenced by hermeneutics and exegesis, particularly within the Abrahamic traditions. Classical and medieval criticism laid foundational concepts for literary analysis. Classical Criticism: Plato criticized poetry as imitative and misleading, arguing it distracts from truth. Aristotle, in *Poetics*, countered this by highlighting literature's cathartic value, emphasizing mimesis (imitation of noble actions) and the emotional purging it provides. His systematic approach categorized poetic forms and their effects, influencing future criticism. Medieval Criticism: Focus shifted to religious texts, intertwining literature with theology. Critics like Augustine echoed Platonic skepticism, viewing poetry through a religious lens, while scholars preserved classical works, often allegorizing them for Christian interpretation. This era saw literature serving didactic purposes, reinforcing moral and spiritual lessons

#### **Renaissance to Enlightenment**

The Renaissance revived classical ideas, emphasizing literature's cultural significance. Critics like Lodovico Castelvetro expanded on Aristotle, while the Enlightenment saw increased public literacy and the emergence of criticism as entertainment. During the Renaissance to Enlightenment period, literary criticism experienced significant transformation, rooted in the revival of classical ideas and humanism. Renaissance Criticism: Emerging in the 14th and 15th centuries, it sought to defend poetry and establish literary imitation as central to literature. Critics like Lodovico Castelvetro expanded upon Aristotle's *Poetics*, emphasizing

the importance of verisimilitude and the role of the vernacular in literature. The period witnessed a shift towards viewing literature as a serious art form rather than mere entertainment, with figures like Sir Philip Sidney advocating for the value of poetry against Puritan critiques. Renaissance criticism emerged in the 14th and 15th centuries, primarily in Italy, as a response to classical texts and the need to defend poetry against its detractors. Key characteristics include: **Defense of Poetry:** Critics like Sir Philip Sidney argued for the value of poetry, countering claims that it was merely frivolous or corrupting. **Imitation:** Following Aristotle, Renaissance critics defined poetry as imitation, but they adapted this concept to emphasize imitation of other writers rather than nature. **Vernacular Language:** There was a strong advocacy for using vernacular languages in literature, moving away from Latin, which was seen as limiting. **Verisimilitude:** Critics emphasized that poetry should reflect reality plausibly, asserting that it must imitate real objects and events. **Classical Unities:** The adherence to classical unities in drama—unity of time, place, and action—was a significant focus, influencing the structure of Renaissance plays.

### **Enlightenment Criticism:**

This era further developed critical discourse, focusing on reason and individualism. Critics began to explore the moral and social implications of literature, reflecting Enlightenment ideals. The transition from Renaissance to Enlightenment saw criticism becoming more systematic, with an emphasis on genre classification and literary theory, paving the way for modern literary analysis. Enlightenment criticism, flourishing in the 18th century, marked a pivotal shift in literary analysis, emphasizing reason and empirical evidence. **Key Features:** **Rationalism and Empiricism:** Critics like John Locke and David Hume championed human reason and sensory experience as sources of knowledge, challenging established religious and traditional authorities. **Literary Accessibility:** With rising literacy rates, literature became more accessible to the public, shifting reading from a privilege of the elite to a widespread form of entertainment. **Critical Discourse:** The period saw the proliferation of literary journals and magazines, where criticism became a public dialogue about moral and aesthetic values in literature, often

reflecting Enlightenment ideals of individual liberty and social progress. Satire and Social Commentary: Writers like Voltaire and Alexander Pope used satire to critique societal norms and injustices, blending entertainment with political critique. This era laid the groundwork for modern literary criticism by intertwining literature with philosophical inquiry and social critique

### **20th Century Developments**

The early 20th century introduced Russian Formalism and New Criticism, prioritizing close textual analysis over authorial intent. This period marked a shift towards philosophical literary theories, influenced by structuralism and post-structuralism, which dominated until the 1980s<sup>134</sup>. In the 20th century, literary criticism evolved significantly through various movements. New Criticism, emerging in the 1920s, emphasized close reading and the text's autonomy, distancing itself from authorial intent and historical context. This approach dominated until the late 1960s, when structuralism and post-structuralism gained traction, incorporating philosophical frameworks into literary analysis. Concurrently, Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial criticisms emerged, challenging traditional narratives and exploring socio-political contexts. The latter half of the century also saw a rise in reader-response theory, which highlighted the reader's role in interpreting texts.

### **CONCLUSION**

The evolution of literary criticism reflects changing societal values and intellectual movements. From Aristotle's foundational concepts in the 4th century BC to the rise of New Criticism in the early 20th century, criticism has adapted to new contexts and ideas. The 20th century saw an explosion of diverse critical theories, including structuralism and post-structuralism, emphasizing the complexity of texts and their interpretations. Today, literary criticism continues to evolve, integrating various methodologies while engaging with contemporary cultural issues, demonstrating its enduring relevance in understanding literature's role in society.

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