

THE EVOLUTION OF CRITICISM. A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *This article focuses on the historical evolution of literary criticism, exploring how it has developed and transformed across different eras. From the philosophical and aesthetic foundations of ancient Greek thought to the complexities of modern post-structuralist and interdisciplinary approaches, it examines the key movements, theories, and figures that have shaped the field. By tracing this progression, the article highlights the dynamic relationship between literature, culture, and critical thought, showcasing how literary criticism has adapted to reflect changing societal, intellectual, and artistic contexts.*

Keywords: *Literary Criticism, Historical Evolution, Aesthetic Analysis, Philosophical Foundations, Cultural Contexts, Modern Approaches, Interdisciplinary Studies*

INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism has always been more than an academic exercise; it is a reflection of how societies engage with literature as a mirror of their values, struggles, and aspirations. Throughout history, literature has served as a medium to question, interpret, and challenge the world, and literary criticism has evolved as a vital tool to deepen this engagement. From the philosophical inquiries of ancient Greece to the diverse theoretical frameworks of the 21st century, literary criticism has expanded its scope to address not only the artistry of texts but also their cultural, political, and psychological implications. At its core, literary criticism seeks to

unravel the layers of meaning embedded in literature, connecting texts to the broader human experience. It has transformed from a discipline focused on evaluating literary merits to a dynamic field that incorporates interdisciplinary approaches, questioning long-held assumptions and amplifying marginalized voices. This evolution has been driven by shifting historical contexts, technological advancements, and the emergence of new ideologies. This article embarks on a journey through the history of literary criticism, tracing its transformation across centuries. By examining key periods, influential thinkers, and groundbreaking theories, we aim to understand how literary criticism has shaped our understanding of literature and, in turn, how it has reflected humanity's quest to make sense of its existence. Whether as a tool for fostering intellectual dialogue or challenging societal norms, literary criticism remains a vital force in exploring the limitless potential of the written word.

Main part

The development of literary criticism is closely tied to the cultural, intellectual, and philosophical evolution of humanity. By examining its historical trajectory, we can better understand how criticism has shaped and been shaped by different eras. The main body of this article explores the evolution of literary criticism across six key periods: classical antiquity, the medieval period, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the modernist era, and contemporary times.

1. Classical Antiquity: The Philosophical Foundations

The roots of literary criticism can be traced to ancient Greece and Rome, where literature was intertwined with philosophy and rhetoric.

Plato's Idealism: Plato's critique of poetry in *The Republic* centered on its potential to mislead audiences through emotional manipulation. He viewed art as an imitation of reality, inherently flawed and distanced from the truth. His skepticism laid the groundwork for the ethical evaluation of literature.

Aristotle's Poetics: Aristotle countered Plato by analyzing literature's intrinsic

value. His work introduced concepts like mimesis (imitation of reality), catharsis (emotional purification), and the structure of tragedy, emphasizing literature's ability to educate and evoke deep emotional responses. Roman Contributions: Critics like Horace (*Ars Poetica*) and Longinus (*On the Sublime*) advanced literary aesthetics. Horace emphasized unity and decorum, while Longinus celebrated the emotional and transcendent power of great literature. These foundations established a critical framework that emphasized both ethical and aesthetic considerations in literature.

2. The Medieval Period: Literature and Morality

In the medieval era, literary criticism was deeply influenced by religion, as literature was primarily evaluated through a theological lens.

Christian Allegory: Critics like St. Augustine and Dante interpreted texts allegorically, focusing on their moral and spiritual lessons. Literature was seen as a tool for conveying religious truths and guiding moral conduct.

Arabic Literary Criticism: During the Islamic Golden Age, scholars like Al-Jurjani and Al-Farabi explored literary aesthetics, rhetoric, and the philosophical underpinnings of poetry, enriching the global tradition of criticism. Medieval criticism prioritized literature's didactic purpose, often subordinating artistic merit to moral and spiritual concerns.

3. The Renaissance: Revival and Humanism The Renaissance marked a turning point in literary criticism, driven by the rediscovery of classical texts and the rise of humanism.

Humanist Perspectives: Figures like Giovanni Boccaccio and Sir Philip Sidney celebrated literature as a reflection of human creativity and intellectual potential. Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* argued that poetry could inspire virtue and imagination.

Neoclassical Principles: Influenced by classical ideals, critics such as Nicolas Boileau and John Dryden emphasized order, harmony, and decorum in literature, laying the groundwork for modern standards of taste and style.

This period signaled a shift from religious to secular approaches, celebrating the

power of literature to elevate the human spirit.

4. Enlightenment and Romanticism: Reason vs. Emotion

The 18th and 19th centuries saw contrasting approaches to literary criticism, reflecting broader intellectual and artistic movements.

The Enlightenment: Critics like Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson valued reason, clarity, and universality, viewing literature as a vehicle for moral and social improvement. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* combined biography with critical analysis, emphasizing the moral impact of literary works.

Romanticism: In contrast, Romantic critics like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge celebrated emotion, imagination, and individual creativity. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* introduced concepts of poetic imagination and organic unity, challenging Enlightenment rationalism.

These movements highlighted the tension between intellectual discipline and artistic freedom, enriching the scope of literary criticism.

5. Modern Literary Criticism: Expanding Horizons

The late 19th and early 20th centuries introduced innovative critical approaches that expanded the boundaries of the field.

Formalist Approaches: The New Criticism in the U.S. and Russian Formalism emphasized close reading and the autonomy of the text, focusing on language, structure, and symbolism.

Psychoanalytic Criticism: Inspired by Freud and Jung, this approach delved into the psychological dimensions of literature, exploring themes like the unconscious, desire, and archetypes.

Marxist Criticism: Marxist critics like Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci analyzed literature in the context of class struggle, ideology, and historical materialism.

Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: Structuralism, led by figures like Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, examined literature as a system of signs. Post-structuralists, including Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, challenged fixed meanings, emphasizing textual instability and power dynamics. These developments

reflected the increasing complexity of modern societies and the interdisciplinary nature of literary studies.

6. Contemporary Literary Criticism: Inclusivity and Innovation

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, literary criticism has embraced a broader range of voices, perspectives, and methodologies.

Feminist and Gender Criticism: Scholars like Judith Butler and Elaine Showalter examine the representation of gender and challenge patriarchal norms in literature.

Postcolonial Criticism: Figures like Edward Said (Orientalism) and Gayatri Spivak critique the impact of colonialism on literature, highlighting issues of identity, power, and resistance.

Ecocriticism: This emerging field addresses the relationship between literature and the environment, reflecting growing concerns about sustainability and ecological awareness.

Digital Humanities: The integration of technology has revolutionized literary analysis, enabling techniques like distant reading, data visualization, and computational criticism. Contemporary criticism reflects the diversity of human experience, pushing the boundaries of traditional frameworks and exploring new ways of engaging with texts

Conclusion

. The evolution of literary criticism is a testament to humanity's enduring engagement with literature as a reflection of its cultural, intellectual, and emotional landscapes. Over the centuries, literary criticism has transformed from a philosophical discourse in ancient Greece to an expansive field that incorporates diverse perspectives and methodologies. Each era has brought its own unique contributions, shaping the way we understand and interact with texts. In classical antiquity, foundational thinkers like Plato and Aristotle laid the groundwork for critical thought, focusing on literature's ethical and aesthetic dimensions. The medieval period added a theological lens, emphasizing morality and spirituality.

The Renaissance, with its revival of humanist ideals, shifted the focus to creativity and individual expression, while the Enlightenment prioritized reason, clarity, and moral improvement. The Romantic era, in turn, celebrated emotion, imagination, and the sublime, challenging the constraints of rationalism. The modernist period introduced groundbreaking approaches such as formalism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism, broadening the scope of literary analysis to include psychology, politics, and social structures. Contemporary literary criticism has further expanded these boundaries, embracing feminist, postcolonial, ecological, and digital humanities perspectives. These developments underscore the field's adaptability and its capacity to address the complexities of modern life. Ultimately, literary criticism remains an indispensable tool for exploring the depths of human creativity and understanding. It allows us to uncover the layers of meaning within texts, challenge conventional interpretations, and amplify marginalized voices. As society continues to evolve, so too will literary criticism, adapting to new cultural contexts, technological advancements, and philosophical inquiries.

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