

ESTABLISHING THE NEXUS BETWEEN LITERARY CRITICISM AND LITERARY THEORY

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Abstract

The study examines ways in which literary criticisms draws from literary theories. The literary critics in order to carry out efficient critical work will not work in abstraction or without having a base. As a result of this, there are usually critical theories. From which the literary critics rely in carrying out their work of literary criticism. The focus of this paper is therefore to examine the various ways in which literary criticism draws from or relies on critical theories. To carry out this study, the researcher embarked on library research and studies books on the related area. Thus adequate information was gathered and analyzed which was used in writing the work. It was observed that there is the need for the literary critics to base their work on literary theories in order to make their work reliable. It is hoped that this study will be useful to the students of literature as well as to the literary writers and critics.

Introduction

Literary criticism is the act of analyzing, evaluating and interpreting literary works. Literary criticism encompasses examining author's work as well as in depth book reviews. Good criticism assesses good qualities of a literary work as well as its

short comings. In the process of literary criticism, the critics weigh the work, discover excellencies and weaknesses and then pass the appropriate judgment. According to Abrams (2009:61) literary criticism, is the overall term for studies concerned with defining, classifying analyzing, interpreting and evaluating works of literature. On the other hand, literary theory is the theory that guide those that criticize people's work(s).

Literary theory is interested in establishing general principles about how literature works and how criticism work (Peck and Coyle 1984) Peck and Coyle further note that in recent years there has been a great surge of such thinking, much of which challenges already established ideas about literature and rejects the assumptions inherent in traditional literary theory and literary criticisms. Abrams (2009:61) also uphold the above view when he asserts that since 1970, there have been a large number of publication-continental, American, and English -proposing diverse radical forms of literary theory. The effect of this has been the development of a number of new forms of literary theories and criticism such as structuralism, formalism, feminist, deconstruction, marxist, new historical etc.

Literary Criticism: A definition and its Procedure.

The frontiers of literary criticisms are hard to define, but suffice it to say that it is a term applied since the 17th century to the analysis, definition, classification, evaluation, justification, description, interpretation and judgment of literature. Literary criticism is the reasoned consideration of literary works and issues. It is any argument about literature, whether or not specific works are analyzed. It is the exposure to the reader what is good in literature and making literature easier to understand right interpreted, enjoyable and more interesting. It can as well be said

to be the analysis of the writer's intention and motives, conscious or unconscious, and motives, leaving the result to the judgment of intelligent readers. That is to say that literary criticism analysis is the process of examining and gathering data from a piece of literature to support a thesis concerning it. According to Rawlinson (1971:2);

Literary criticism can be no more than a reasoned account of the effect produced upon the critic by the book he is criticizing; criticism can never be a science; it is, in the first place, much too personal, and in the second, it is concerned with values that science ignores. The touchstone is emotion, not reason. We judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion, and nothing else.

That is to say, that criticism has to do with emotion, the feeling depending on how the work touches the critic. In addition Abcarian and Klotz (1975:5), opine that literary criticism has to do with the value of literature, its goodness or badness, not with the history of literature. This is because value judgments tend to be highly subjective, lively and sometimes even acrimonious, debates among literary critics accompany their diverse responses to and judgments of the same work.

The judgments literary critics make about a story or poem are bound to reflect their own cherished values. The truth of a work of art is obviously very different from the truth of a mathematical formula. As a matter of fact ones attitudes towards war, politics, religion, sex, crime, culture etc, are irrelevant to ones judgment of a literary work. However, any examination of the broad range of literary criticism reveals that groups of critics (and as a matter of fact, all readers are critics) share certain assumptions about literature. The implication is that these shared assumptions

control the way that critics approach a work, the elements they tend to look for and emphasize, the details that are significant or insignificant, and lastly, their overall judgment of the work.

During the interpretation of a literary work, you find out its possible meanings: Generally, people held the idea that in a literary work, its meaning lies buried within some place waiting to be discovered that is to say that a clever reader has it as his duty to find out where the author is going, that is, his intention to find out what a story, a play or a poem is all about as the actual meaning of the work is lying between lines waiting for a reader's interpretation based on his knowledge and experiences.

In the recent time, a different model of the reading method; one that considers the reader as well as the work he is interpreting has emerged. Most contemporary critics see the reading process method as a situation where meaning is created through the readers' interaction with the text. The meaning of a particular work comes alive in the imagination of an individual reader and no reader can determine the meaning of a work without considering his own feelings and reaction to the text. In other words, meaning is created partly by the content of the work and partly by the ability of the reader.

As criticism begins with the reader's response, it would be possible to produce impressionistic criticism in which one wrote about his feeling perhaps commenting on how interesting and emotional a poem is or rather how it called your attention to a life experience. As a matter of fact, academic criticism must be more analytical than this, touching at the subject matter, method adopted in the text as well as the language of the text. However, criticism involves finding out the central themes of the work and then seeing how the author presents and develops these themes.

In order to carry out an effective critical work, you have to find out in the broadest terms, what the text is all about, what kind of issue or problem or feeling is being discussed; you then have to look out for how the subject matter is handled and this will help to throw more light on what the text is all about. A good critic will look out for the various choices the author has made for instance the choice of words and diction which will help to bring the message home that is, make the text understandable. With these the critical work will become more meaningful than a mere summary or description of the work/text.

Literary Theory

Literary theory sometimes designated “critical theory” and now undergoing a transformation into “cultural theory” within the discipline of literary studies is a body of ideas and methods we use in the practical reading of literature. It can be understood as the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining or interpreting literary text. Literary theory refers not to the meaning of a work of literature but to the theories that reveal what literature can mean. It is a description of the underlying principles, one might say the tools, by which we attempt to understand literature. All literary interpretation draws on a basis in theory but can serve as a justification for very different kinds of critical activity. It is literary theory that formulates the relationship between author and work.

Coring et al (2001:135) note that one of the things that students who follow courses in literary theory typically discover is that they have been confronting, and resolving literary theoretical problems for many years without necessarily being aware of the fact. Every time one writes an essay one makes decisions about issues which have exercised the minds of theorists, and about

which they have probably disagreed and clashed swords. One's decisions will emerge from a set of assumptions which together constitute a theoretical position. Coring et al, (2001:135) note that it is better to be conscious of the nature of those assumptions and that position. They note that once one is so conscious, one can modify one's theoretical position in the light of one's critical or literary practice. This is because unconscious assumptions are often hard to modify. Coring et al (2001: 136) observe that the body of knowledge that we know as literary theory contains the fruits of generations of engagement with certain recurrent problems which the reading and interpretation of literary works throws up. Students of literature ought to be aware of the issues that have been argued about in the history of the discipline. It is preferable to make informed decisions that rely both on more practical skills developed through the reading and study of literary works and also on the theoretical issues that comes with the study of literary theory. One's skill as a writer, reader and critic will be enhanced by a sound knowledge of literary theory.

According to Eagleton (2008:viii), literary theory is a kind of meta-discourse. Rather than figuring as one way of speaking about literature among others, it adopts a critical stance to other forms of critical analysis. Eagleton notes that for instance, that critics may wrangle over whether Oscar Wilde is a major or minor writer, but theorists prefer to investigate the (often unconscious) norms and criteria by which we make such judgments in the first place. Literary theory offers varying approaches for understanding the role of historical context in interpretation as well as the relevance of linguistic and unconscious elements in the text. Literary theorist, trace the history and evaluation of the different genres – narrative, dramatic, lyric – in addition to the more recent emergence of the novel and the short story while also investigating

the importance of formal elements of literary structure. In recent years, literary theory has sought to explain the degree to which the text is more the product of a culture than an individual author and in turn how those texts help to create the culture.

Ways in Which Literary Criticism Draws from Literary Theories

Literary theory is a theory that guides those that criticize people's literary works. Not all criticism is sound, timely, or responsible and not all literary criticism is pertinent to your assignment or useful to your purposes. Some critical comments will strike you as plausible. Whereas others will seem unfounded or biased. According to Kirszner and Mandell (2001:14);

Quite often two critics will reach strikingly different conclusions about the quality or significance of the same work or writer or will interpret a character, a symbol, or even the entire work quite differently.

Because of these differences in interpretation and evaluation of works among the literary critics, the critical theory serves as a guidelines and set standard for good literary criticism. In the words of Peck and Coyle (1984), they uphold the above view by saying that literary theory is concerned with establishing general principles about how literature works, and how criticism work. In addition, Held (1980:105) notes that;

It covers a wide range of academic disciplines and can be applied to any field of knowledge. Examples; education theory, design theory, design practice, architecture, psychology etc. It does not simply try to understand the nature of social world but try to change it.

From the above definitions, we can simply deduce that there is a close relationship between literary criticism and literary theory. The two work hand –in-hand.

Literary criticism relies on literary theory for efficient judgment/ evolution, interpretation and analyses of literary work. In expatiating on this view, Kirszner and Mandell (2001:1948) opines that scholars influenced by Marxist criticism base their reading of literature on the social and economic theories of Karl Marx and his colleague and co-author Friedrich Engels. These theorists, Marx and Engels believed that the dominant capitalist middle class would eventually be challenged and overthrown by the working class, who produced excess products and profits; yet they do not share in the benefit of their labour.

Marx and Engels further regarded all parts of the society in which they lived - religious, legal, educational, governmental – as tainted (that is corrupted) by what they saw as the corruption values of the middle –class capitalists. For the fact that literary criticism draws from literary theory, Marxist critics apply these views to their reading of poetry, fiction and drama. They tend to analyze the literary works of any historical era as products of the ideology, or network of concepts that supports the interests of the cultural elite and suppresses those of the working class.

Some Marxist critics see all western literature as distorted by the privileged views of the elite class, but most believe that at least some creative writers rejected the distorted views of their society and instead see clearly the wrongs to which working class people have been subjected. For example, Geogre Lukas, Hungarian Marxist critics, proposed that great works of literature create their own worlds, which reflects life with clarity. These great works, though not written by Marxists, can be studied for their revealing examples of class conflict and other Marxist

concerns. A Marxist critic would certainly look with favour on Charles Dickens, who in nearly every novel pointed out inequalities in the political, legal and educational establishments of his time. Those who remember *Oliver Twists'* pitiful plea for "more work house porridge" (refused by evil Mr. Bumble, who skims money from funds intended to feed the impoverished inmates) cannot help but see fertile ground for the Marxist critic, who would certainly applaud criticism of social and economic inequality.

The knowledge of literary theory enables a critic to do his work efficiently. This is true as people's response to literary text sometimes differ greatly. Factors such as one's personality, life style, experiences, exposure, environment, level of education etc. may lead people to adopt various kind of value judgment and as such react different to stories, plays and poems after reading. So to avoid the problem of individual differences in responding to literary texts, the critics usually rely on the guiding principles provided by critical theory.

Often, literary critics also adopt reaching method strategies that reflect personal affiliation to various critical theories such as structuralism, Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalytic criticism, reader response criticism, the new historicism, etc. At times, the personal reactions and knowledge of a literary theory cannot give him enough in sight into a literary work. For example, things like historical allusions, obscure references, archaic language and textual inconsistencies can make reading a work particularly difficult. Obviously an intellectual philosophical movement such as Darwinism, Marxism, naturalism, structuralism or feminism may influence a work and if this is the case, you will need some knowledge of the movement before you can interpret the work.

Literary theory guides critics for effective literary criticism. Critics ought to study and understand theories adequately before engaging in their work.

This is proper because the study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of the text. It is necessary to find out the type of person that wrote the novel, play the poem or the essay. What forces acted upon him as he wrote? What was the historical, political, Philosophical, economic, cultural background? Was the writer accepting or rejecting the literary conventions of the time in question, or developing them, or creating entirely new kinds of literary expressions? Are there interactions between the art, music or architecture of the period? Was the writer affected by contemporary issues or isolated? Such question shows that there is the need for a critic to go beyond the reading of set texts, to widen their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology of action and reaction and of the varying relationships between writers and society.

In addition, histories of literature can encourage critics to make comparisons, can aid in understanding the purposes of individual authors and in assessing the totality of their achievements. Their development can be better understood and appreciated with some knowledge of their background.

Conclusion

From the fore-going discussion we discover that the literary critics do not just work on their own independently; rather they rely on some theoretical principles which help them to maintain certain standard. We have noted that two critics can interpret and assess the same literary text differently based on their individual differences. We cited the Marxist critics as typical example of how

critics base their work reaching of literature on the social and economic theories of Karl Marx and his colleague and co-author Friedrich Engels. That is to say that Marxist scholars carry out their literary criticism in line with what Marx and Friedrich Engels advocate. Conclusively, it is pertinent to assert that literary criticism draws greatly from literary theories.

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