

APPROACHES TO INTERPRETING LITERATURE

Richard L. W. Clarke

Literary criticism is the practice of interpreting and writing about literature as the latter, in turn, strives to make sense of the world. Literary theory is the study of the principles which inform how critics go about making sense of literary works. There are at least five main ways of, or approaches to, interpreting literature. I would suggest that the kinds of questions which are set on literary texts (whether in class or in an exam setting) must correspond in one way or another to these five basic ways of interpreting literary texts.

A) The most obvious, commonsensical way to think of literature is as a verbal representation of the real world. Literary works, especially prose fiction, are thought to be realistic if they hold a mirror up to 'life.' The realism of particular characters, their fidelity to actual human beings, is often at the crux of such concerns. In technical terms, this is called the 'mimetic' approach to criticism. Hence, questions of the sort: "'Lamming's gift for the depiction of the West Indian labourer is unparalleled.' Discuss with reference to In the Castle of my Skin."

B) Another obvious way of thinking about literature is to read it for what it reveals about the author and, by extension, the place and time (the social and historical context) in which s/he lived. Literature, from this point of view, is a form of self-expression and literary works (especially lyric poems) are seen as windows into the soul of their writers. In technical terms, this is called the 'expressive' approach to criticism. Hence, questions of the sort: "'A close examination of Shakespeare's sonnets reveal the presence of a beautiful soul.' Would you agree?" or "Wordsworth's poetry reveals much not only about the man but about the world in which he lived." Discuss with reference to his Lyrical Ballads."

C) Some critics are concerned with the impact, especially of moral kind, which literature has upon the audience. For example, can literature (and, by extension, other cultural practices like music) have a bad effect upon those who are exposed to it? Can literature make you adopt deplorable attitudes and even do bad things? Does literature accordingly need to be censored? On the other hand, can literature also have a good impact on the reader? Concerns of this sort are often grouped under what is sometimes called the 'pragmatic' approach to criticism. Hence, questions of the sort: "'Aeschylus' plays are a hotbed of vice and murder.' Do you think they should be banned? If so, why?"

It should be noted that, in recent years, some critics are concerned less with the impact which literature has on the reader than the other way around, that is, with the impact which the reader has on the work. In other words, are readers passive absorbers of the meaning waiting to be found in a given work or do they necessarily impose their subjective point of view, their preferences, their biases and what not on the work in question? To put this another way, some theorists argue that literary criticism is not an impersonal, objective affair but a necessarily subjective and perspectival undertaking, that is, we always criticise literary works from a particular angle.

D) Other critics attempt to describe the verbal form or structure of the work, in other words, how a given work is put together and, importantly, to what end. The focus of such critics is on one or more of the following elements:

- the genre: poetry, prose fiction or drama together with the various sub-categories

- (e.g. a tragedy as opposed to a comic play, or lyric as opposed to epic poetry);
- the development of the work from beginning to end: the plot-structure of a play, the narrative structure of a short story or novel and the point of view from which the story is narrated, etc.; and
- the diction of the work, especially its figurative language (metaphors, similes, etc.).

This is called the 'objective' approach to criticism. Hence, questions of the sort: "A mixture of pity and fear is inevitably inspired in the audience.' How exactly does the plot-structure of King Lear produce these emotions?"

E) The final critical approach, for which there is no fancy name per se, attempts to situate each writer and his or her works in relation to what is sometimes termed 'literary history' and, in some cases, the so-called 'canon.' Literature has a history (in the sense that Chaucer precedes Shakespeare who precedes Wordsworth, and so on) and each writer works during a particular period of that history. Critics interested in literature from this angle try to historically categorise authors (e.g. Shakespeare is normally classified as a Renaissance writer while Wordsworth is deemed a Romantic) and to study whether the literature produced during a given period shares certain characteristics (e.g. what must the poetry of a Shakespeare and a Milton have in common for it to be classified as Renaissance literature?). Such critics are also interested in exploring the relationships of influence (and rejection) linking earlier and later writers (e.g. was Wordsworth influenced by Milton? If so, how exactly?). Some also explore whether particular writers should belong to what is often called the 'canon,' that small number of core writers and their works who are thought to be inherently more valuable and thus worth studying above all others. Hence, questions such as: "What exactly is 'Romantic' about Wordsworth's poetry?" or "How do Post-colonial Caribbean writers resist the influence of canonical writers like Shakespeare?".

It should be noted that these approaches are not mutually exclusive and often overlap with one another. For example, to discuss *what* a literary work represents (a particular place and time and the people who inhabit them) almost inevitably necessitates an examination of *how* exactly it does so (narrative structure, use of figurative language, and so on). In other words, a mimetic approach to criticism is often inevitably deployed in conjunction with the objective approach. By the same token, a discussion of what a literary work reveals about its writer and/or his or her world is most often inextricably linked to an examination of the precise features of the language used by the writer. In this case, then, the expressive approach goes hand in hand with the objective.

WORLD (MIMETIC)

WRITER (EXPRESSIVE) → TEXT → READER (PRAGMATIC)

LANGUAGE (OBJECTIVE)

For a useful overview of the main approaches to literary criticism, please see the opening chapter entitled "Introduction: Orientation of Critical Theories" of M. H. Abrams' The Mirror and the Lamp.