

Lecture 1 : The Origins of Contemporary Literary Criticism

Contemporary literary criticism has evolved from various intellectual traditions that emerged from classical antiquity, developed through the Enlightenment, and culminated in 20th and 21st-century critical theories. Below is a detailed exploration of its origins:

1. Classical Foundations: Greek and Roman Criticism

The roots of literary criticism date back to ancient Greece and Rome, where philosophers and rhetoricians laid the groundwork for analyzing literature.

- **Plato (c. 427–347 BCE):**
 - In *The Republic*, Plato was skeptical of poetry, viewing it as an imitation (*mimesis*) of reality that could mislead society.
 - He proposed that literature should serve moral and philosophical purposes.
- **Aristotle (384–322 BCE):**
 - *Poetics* introduced key concepts like *mimesis*, *catharsis*, and the *unities* of time, place, and action in drama.
 - He defended poetry as a means of revealing universal truths.
- **Horace (65–8 BCE):**
 - His *Ars Poetica* emphasized *decorum* (the idea that a work's style should suit its subject).
 - He advocated for literature that both pleases and instructs.
- **Longinus (1st century CE):**
 - In *On the Sublime*, he explored the emotional and aesthetic impact of literature.

These classical ideas remained influential throughout history.

2. Medieval and Renaissance Criticism

During the Middle Ages, criticism was largely moralistic and theological, influenced by Christian doctrine.

- **St. Augustine (354–430):** Saw literature as valuable only when aligned with Christian teachings.
- **Dante (1265–1321):** In *De vulgari eloquentia*, he defended literature in the vernacular rather than Latin.

With the Renaissance (14th–17th centuries), humanism revived classical texts and introduced a more secular literary criticism.

- **Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586):** In *The Defence of Poesy*, he argued that poetry instructs and delights, countering Plato’s skepticism.

3. Enlightenment and Neoclassical Criticism (17th–18th Centuries)

This period emphasized reason, order, and universal principles in literature.

- **John Dryden (1631–1700):** Promoted balance and decorum in literature.
- **Alexander Pope (1688–1744):** His *Essay on Criticism* advocated for rules in poetry, inspired by Aristotle and Horace.
- **Samuel Johnson (1709–1784):** His *Lives of the Poets* combined biographical criticism with moral judgment.

The period’s focus on rationality and order laid the foundation for later formalist criticism.

4. Romantic Criticism (Late 18th–19th Centuries)

Romanticism reacted against Enlightenment rationalism, emphasizing imagination, emotion, and individuality.

- **William Wordsworth (1770–1850):** *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* championed poetry as an expression of personal feeling.
- **Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834):** Distinguished between *imagination* (a creative force) and *fancy* (mere recombination of ideas).
- **Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822):** In *A Defence of Poetry*, he argued that poets are the “unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

Romantic criticism paved the way for later psychological and reader-response theories.

5. 19th-Century Realism and Historicism

As the novel became the dominant literary form, criticism shifted toward realism and historical analysis.

- **Matthew Arnold (1822–1888):** Argued that literature should be judged by its moral and cultural value (*Culture and Anarchy*).
- **Karl Marx (1818–1883):** Introduced the idea that literature reflects and reinforces social structures. His ideas later influenced Marxist criticism.
- **Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900):** Challenged traditional morality and truth, influencing postmodern criticism.

This period saw the rise of historical approaches to literature, anticipating New Historicism.

6. The Rise of Modern Literary Criticism (Early 20th Century)

The early 20th century saw a turn toward formalist and structuralist approaches.

A. Formalism and Structuralism

1. Russian Formalism (1910s–1930s)

- Figures like Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson focused on the form and function of literary devices.
- Emphasized *defamiliarization* (*ostranenie*), the idea that literature makes the familiar seem strange.

2. New Criticism (1930s–1950s, USA & UK)

- Advocated close reading, focusing on the text itself rather than external context.
- Key figures: T.S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, I.A. Richards.

B. Structuralism and Semiotics (1950s–1970s)

- Inspired by **Ferdinand de Saussure** (linguist), who argued that meaning arises from language structures.

- **Claude Lévi-Strauss** applied structuralist methods to myths and literature.
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7. Contemporary Literary Criticism (Mid-20th Century – Present)

After structuralism, criticism became more diverse, incorporating perspectives from philosophy, psychology, feminism, and postcolonial studies.

A. Poststructuralism and Deconstruction (1960s–1980s)

- **Roland Barthes (1915–1980):** Declared the “Death of the Author,” shifting focus to the reader.
- **Jacques Derrida (1930–2004):** Developed *deconstruction*, arguing that language is unstable and meaning is always deferred.

B. Psychoanalytic Criticism

- **Sigmund Freud (1856–1939):** Literature as a reflection of unconscious desires.
- **Jacques Lacan (1901–1981):** Applied Freudian theory to language and literature.

C. Marxist and Cultural Criticism

- **Louis Althusser:** Ideology in literature.
- **Raymond Williams & Terry Eagleton:** Literature as a product of historical and social forces.

D. Feminist and Gender Criticism

- **Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler:** Examined gender roles in literature.

E. Postcolonial and Critical Race Theories

- **Edward Said (1935–2003):** *Orientalism* exposed how literature constructs the "other."
- **Homi Bhabha & Gayatri Spivak:** Focused on identity, hybridity, and colonial discourse.

F. Ecocriticism and Digital Humanities

- **Recent trends** examine literature through environmental and technological perspectives.
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Conclusion

Contemporary literary criticism is a culmination of centuries of thought, shaped by philosophical, linguistic, and social theories. Today, it is a pluralistic field incorporating multiple perspectives, from close textual analysis to broader socio-political critiques.