



KINDS OF INTERPRETING TEXT - A CRITIQUE STUDY

SUMIT GHAYAL

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English

Central University of Karnataka Kalburgi

(KR) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Today there are a number of modes of criticism /interpretation available to us, and that we can apply while analysing any work of art or any piece of literature. One important fact to notice in these modes of interpretation is that each mode of interpretation has got its own area of focus or concentration. When we go back to the time of Plato; we find that Plato judged a particular work of art by applying certain norms or criteria. He was a utilitarian and he believed in the doctrine –“art for life’s sake”. For him practicality and utility were the sole criteria to judge the value of a work of art. He could not conceive of art as divorced from morality.

Key Words: *New Criticism, Practical Criticism,*

INTRODUCTION:

After Plato there comes the first scientific literary critic, Aristotle (also the disciple of Plato). He believed that it is pleasure-giving quality in art which is to be cared for more than any other thing. He prepared the ground to divorce art from morality. He stressed the importance of rhetoric in arts. Thus, the slogan “art for art’s sake” or **aestheticism** has its proper beginning in the views proposed by Aristotle. In short, it is Aristotle who maintained that art is separate from morality and does not need to take moral or practical issues into consideration. From Aristotle when we move onwards; we are supposed to stop at the views proposed by Horace and Longinus and provide a great deal of attention towards their views. For example, Longinus said that a particular work of art is considered great for its sublimity. Not

SUMIT GHAYAL

1Page



instruction or delight or persuasion, therefore is the test of great literature; but transport-its capacity to move the readers to ecstasy caused by a number of things e.g. **grandeur of thought, high feeling, appropriate use of figures of speech, nobility of diction and dignity of composition.**

From these important developments in literary criticism or interpretation, we will directly direct our attention to the developments in the twentieth century.

New criticism:

Before twentieth century, we were more inclined to relate a text to “**extrinsic factors**”, such as biographical, historical, political or religious considerations. In the twentieth century, the term ‘interpretation’ has tended to be used in more restricted sense. With the emergence of ‘New criticism’, interpretation took a new direction .New criticism argued for the ‘**autonomy of the text**’ in order to rescue literature from the crushing effects of the biographer or the literary or cultural historian. The poem’s meaning is thus to be explored not by asking questions which lead us into biography or history.

With the development of New criticism, a new assumption came to light that poem is a unity carrying within its structure all the information necessary to understand it. In short, the key assumption of New criticism is that the poem’s meaning resides in the words actually appearing on the page, in the order in which they appear.

Thus while interpreting any text ‘**close reading**’ of text was stressed by New criticism. So the main concern of New criticism is to ignore whatever source materials went into its creation: biographical, literary, political, cultural, philosophical. For example, from Eliot, New criticism borrows its insistence that criticism should be directed toward the poem, and not the poet. Eliot brought forward the terms like **objective correlative, impersonal theory of poetry.**

There are other modes of criticism that emerged in the twentieth century. Two of them come under applied criticism. They are **practical criticism** and **stylistic analysis.**

Practical Criticism:

Practical critics often apply aesthetic principles; and they concentrate on performing a close reading of the text. Practical criticism is that exercise in which we are given a poem or a passage of prose, or sometimes an extract from a play, that we have not seen before and are asked to write a critical analysis of it. Usually we are not told who wrote the poem or passage, and usually too, we are not given any indication of what we might look for or say.



We can sum it up, then, as criticism based on the close analysis of a text in isolation. The idea of practical criticism is that it would concentrate on the text and its verbal nuances without preconceived ideas about the author. What makes practical criticism different from traditional criticism is that it pays little attention to the social and historical contexts. It is common examination practice for texts to be analysed or criticized without their titles or authors being given; or simply extracts of a text to be studied. What matters is the effect of the work on the reader, and his/her own intuitive responses.

Stylistic Analysis

Another branch of applied criticism is stylistics. Here also the idea of looking closely at texts is basic/fundamental. It is in fact more practical than practical criticism; since it bases its interpretation on the significant linguistic features and tries to avoid impression or subjectivity.

Stylistic analysis looks for sound pattern [assonance, consonance alliteration, rhyme], meter and rhythm, caesura, enjambment, neologism archaism, selectional restrictions, cohesion, sentence structures [loose, periodic], redundancy, tautology, parallelism, intertextuality, paradox, etc. used for the special effects by the poets and authors.

Structuralism

From new criticism we gradually move towards another mode of interpretation i.e. structuralism. If our aim is to interpret a text from structuralism point of view; then our main concern should be to explore the kind of language system, the kind of structures, the kind of patterns, the kind of grammar and other devices such as, parallelism, contrasts, and repetitions etc. used by the writers while writing a particular work of art. It is so because structuralism is more interested in “**langue**” [language system] and not in “**parole**” [actual speech or writing with the help of ‘langue’ (language system)].

Thus, structuralists are not interested in the questions like –“*what is being expressed in the poem?*”, “*Is it real or not?*”, but they are concerned with the way in which a particular content is being expressed, i.e., the kind of language system used by the writer to create the meanings in that literary work.

Further Saussure says that there are referential centers of meaning. As Saussure calls language a **sign system**; so every word in that sign system is a sign which has two aspects: **signifier (any written or spoken word)** and **signified (meaning or mental concept emerging from that signifier)**. Thus every written word in a text is a signifier whose



meaning can be explored by referring to the particular sign system in which they appear. Hence Saussure says that while interpreting a text we get referential centers of meaning.

Deconstruction

After structuralism we move to post-structuralism and there we find another mode of interpretation i.e. deconstruction. If our intention is to analyse a text from deconstruction point of view; then we are supposed to read the poem with the aim of unmasking internal contradictions or inconsistencies, paradoxes and various kinds of shifts and breaks in the continuity of the poem that contribute to no stable meaning but the *“multiplicity of meaning”*. Shifts can be of various types: there may be shifts in focus, time, tone, point of view, or in attitude, place or vocabulary e.g. the shift from first person to third person, or from past tense to present. Thus, these shifts reveal the instabilities of attitude, and hence the lack of unified position. So the primary aim of deconstructive reading is to show the plurality of meaning and interpretation rather than a single stable meaning. Hence, there is disunity underlying the apparent unity. In short, deconstructive approach says that we can't arrive at fixed/determinate meaning. Hence Hillis Miller says, **“All reading is misreading”**.

So far, we closely observed the development from New criticism to deconstruction; and one important thing brought to light is that, gradually we are forgetting author and other external details of the text i.e. biographical, historical, political considerations of the text. Thus we are becoming more and more text oriented. This development reaches to the extreme point when Roland Barthes comes up with the essay: **“Death of the Author”**.

But as nothing remains constant / forever, we see the later developments in the field of literary criticism/interpretation i.e. psychoanalytical criticism, New historicism. Thus again we are gradually moving to the external details.

Psychoanalytical Criticism

If we concentrate on a text from psychoanalytic point of view; then our efforts should be directed to analyse a particular literary work with an eye to their authors' personalities. This type of criticism considers a literary text as an expression of the state of mind and the structure of personality of an individual author. The primary belief of psychoanalytic criticism/approach is that literary work is the external expression of author's unconscious mind i.e. hidden motives, repressed feelings, desires and wishes etc. Later on this mode of criticism developed to such an extent that while analysing a particular work of art, focus was also centered on characters in the work i.e. their personality, mentality etc. For example, while



studying **Shakespeare's *Hamlet*** from psychoanalytic point of view we focus on Hamlet's (prince of Denmark) personality, his state of mind, his philosophical mind etc.

Thus, this type of literary criticism tries to understand the personalities of authors or to understand their modes of consciousness and thinking. So it explores and analyses both literature in general and specific literary texts in terms of mental processes.

New Historicism

After psychoanalytical criticism we move to another significant mode of interpretation i.e. New Historicism. Now again we are moving towards the things that were neglected by New criticism, Practical criticism. This can be described as moving in the direction from where we have come so long to declare the death of the author. But this time we are moving back with a different outlook and perspective .We will make this point clear by comparing New Historicism with old historicism.

In old historicism history serves as a background to literature; and of primary importance is the text, the art object itself .The historical background of the text is only of secondary importance; for it is the aesthetic object, the text that mirrors the history of its times. The historical context, then, serves to shed light upon the object of primary concern, i.e the text.

On the other hand, New Historicism is an approach that advocates the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts usually of the same period. In other words, the non-literary text becomes a co-text of the literary text. The literary work is not privileged against the background of historical and non-literary texts. **The textuality of history and historicity of texts** are given equal weight in New Historicism. New Historicism does not believe that literature is independent of the economic, social and political conditions specific to an era in which it is written. Literary text is simply one of many kinds of texts –religious, philosophical, legal, scientific and so on-all of which are formed and structured by the particular conditions of the a time and place, and among which literary text has neither unique status or special privilege. Thus New Historicists juxtapose literary and non-literary, reading the former in the light of the other.

In short, for New Historicism the object of study is not the text and its context, not literature and its history but rather literature in history, literature as a constitute and inseparable part of history. New Historicists argue that literature does have powerful effect on history and vice versa.

Other modes of interpretation:



Archetypal criticism

It was an approach to literature started and expanded by Frye in 1957 with the publication of his book '*Anatomy of Criticism*'. This is the practice of analysing literature by looking for recurring patterns of plot, character, theme, symbol, image, narrative detail etc. and relating them to the universal experiences of humanity. Because Frye asserts; that while writing every writer consciously or unconsciously draws upon the storehouse of myths, symbols, images, genres, etc. Hence a myth, a genre, an idea, a symbol can be derived from author's unconscious mind and brought into conscious mind at the time of writing.

An example of archetypal character is the devil figure, which often appears in pure mythic form (as in Milton's '*Paradise Lost*' 1667) but in modern literature occurs in disguise, like Fagin in Charles Dickens' '*Oliver Twist*' (1837-38).

Expressionism

In general expressionists hold that objective depictions of circumstances and thoughts (that is from an external point of view) cannot actually render an individual's subjective or emotional experience of these things. Expressionists thus reject realism and share the impressionist intention to present a personal vision through art. But later on this expressive form, belief considered to be fallacious by New critics. Thus according to expressionism if poet feels strongly enough about their subjects, the intensity of their feelings will be transferred to their poems and felt by their readers.

Impressionistic Criticism

This is a type of criticism that centers on critic's subjective impressions, that is, on the feelings elicited and associations prompted by the experience of the work rather than on the thoughts arising from a rigorous, intellectual analysis of it. In short as we read a work of art or experience it, we form our own opinion, impression of that work of art. Here we are personally involved in the text rather than just a detached observer.

Pragmatic Criticism:

Pragmatic critics believe that authors structure their works in such a way as to attain certain specific effects on and elicit certain responses from the reader or audience. These critics evaluate a work based on their perception of the success or failure of that work to achieve its objectives.



Objective Criticism

This is a type of criticism that views any given literary work as freestanding, independent of external references to its authors, audience, or the environment in which it is written or read. That is, the **work is viewed as a world in itself**. Objective critics consider, for instance, whether a work is coherent and unified and how its various components relate to one another rather than how the work is or was received by the public.

In twentieth century, objective criticism has evolved through the work of several proponents of practical criticism, especially formalism and New criticism.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, having acquired familiarity with a variety of modes of interpretation, we reach to a specific conclusion that each mode of interpretation has developed an approach, which is quite different from other mode of interpretation. But any single mode of criticism or interpretation cannot lead to the complete analysis of a text; for each theory is limited in its approach towards literary text i.e. it will look for certain things in a text. For example, archetypal mode of interpretation will look for recurring symbols, image, character, plot etc. Hence, what is required is an amalgam of the best in each mode of interpretation, which will bring out complete analysis of a text.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. *Charles E. Bressler* [1994] “**Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice**” [Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey]
2. *N. Krishnaswamy, John Varghese, Sunita Mishra* [2001] “**Contemporary Literary Theory: Student’s Companion**” [Macmillan India Limited,]
3. *Peter Barry* [1995] “**Beginning Theory**” [Manchester University Press, New York]
4. *Raman Selden* [1986] “**A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory**” [The Harvester Press]