

## THE EVOLUTION OF LITERARY CRITICISM: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** Literary criticism, the analysis and interpretation of literary works, has evolved significantly throughout history, reflecting changing societal values, philosophical perspectives, and literary movements. This evolution can be traced through distinct periods, each marked by unique methodologies, objectives, and key figures.

**Keywords:** Literary Criticism, Literary Theory, Interpretation, Analysis, Textual Analysis, Hermeneutics, Methodology, Literary Movements, Historical Context, Social Values, Philosophical Perspectives, Evolution

### INTRODUCTION

Although almost all of the [criticism](#) ever written dates from the 20th century, questions first posed by Plato and Aristotle are still of prime concern, and every critic who has attempted to justify the social value of [literature](#) has had to come to terms with the opposing argument made by [Plato](#) in [The Republic](#). The poet as a man and [poetry](#) as a form of statement both seemed untrustworthy to Plato, who depicted the physical world as an imperfect copy of [transcendent](#) ideas and poetry as a mere copy of the copy. Thus, literature could only mislead the seeker of truth. Plato credited the poet with divine inspiration, but this, too, was cause for worry; a man possessed by such madness would subvert the interests of a rational polity.

In his [Poetics](#)—still the most respected of all discussions of literature—[Aristotle](#) countered Plato's indictment by stressing what is normal and useful about literary art.

Although Plato and Aristotle are regarded as [antagonists](#), the narrowness of their disagreement is noteworthy. Both maintain that poetry is mimetic, both treat the arousing of emotion in the perceiver, and both feel that poetry takes its justification, if any, from its service to the state. It was obvious to both men that poets wielded [great power](#) over others. Unlike many modern critics who have tried to show that poetry is more than a pastime, Aristotle had to offer reassurance that it was not socially explosive.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

### Medieval period

In the Christian Middle Ages criticism suffered from the loss of nearly all the ancient critical texts and from an antipagan distrust of the literary imagination. Such Church Fathers as Tertullian, Augustine, and Jerome renewed, in churchly guise, the Platonic argument against poetry. But both the ancient gods and the surviving classics reasserted their fascination, entering medieval culture in theologically allegorized form. Encyclopaedists and textual commentators explained the supposed Christian content of pre-Christian works and the Old Testament. Although there was no lack of rhetoricians to dictate the correct use of literary figures, no attempt was made to derive critical principles from emergent genres such as the fabliau and the chivalric romance [1,34].

### The Renaissance

[Renaissance](#) criticism grew directly from the recovery of classic texts and notably from Giorgio Valla's translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Latin in 1498. By 1549 the *Poetics* had been rendered into Italian as well. From this period until the later part of the 18th century Aristotle was once again the most imposing presence behind literary theory. Critics looked to ancient poems and plays for insight into the permanent laws of art. The most influential of Renaissance critics was probably [LodovicoCastelvetro](#), whose

1570 commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* encouraged the writing of tightly structured plays by extending and codifying Aristotle's idea of the dramatic unities [2, 133].

### Romanticism

Romanticism, an [amorphous](#) movement that began in [Germany](#) and England at the turn of the 19th century, and somewhat later in France, Italy, and the [United States](#), found spokesmen as [diverse](#) as Goethe and August and [Friedrich von Schlegel](#) in Germany, [William Wordsworth](#) and [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#) in England, [Madame de Staël](#) and [Victor Hugo](#) in France, [Alessandro Manzoni](#) in Italy, and [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) and [Edgar Allan Poe](#) in the United States [3, 56].

### **The 20th century**

The ideal of objective research has continued to guide Anglo-American literary scholarship and [criticism](#) and has prompted work of unprecedented accuracy. Bibliographic procedures have been revolutionized; historical scholars, biographers, and historians of theory have placed criticism on a sounder basis of factuality. Important contributions to literary understanding have meanwhile been drawn from anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, and [psychoanalysis](#). Impressionistic method has given way to systematic inquiry from which [gratuitous](#) assumptions are, if possible, excluded. Yet demands for a more ethically committed criticism have repeatedly been made, from the [New Humanism](#) of [Paul Elmer More](#) and [Irving Babbitt](#) in the [United States](#) in the 1920s, through the moralizing criticism of the Cambridge don [F.R. Leavis](#) and of the American poet [Yvor Winters](#), to the most recent demands for "relevance"[4,133].

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The debate over poetic truth may illustrate how modern discussion is beholden to extraliterary knowledge. Critics have never ceased disputing whether [literature](#) depicts the world correctly, incorrectly, or not at all, and the dispute has often had more to do with the support or condemnation of specific authors than with ascertainable facts about [mimesis](#). Today it may be almost impossible to take a stand regarding [poetic](#) truth without also coming to terms with [positivism](#) as a total epistemology. The spectacular achievements of

physical [science](#) have (with logic questioned by some) downgraded [intuition](#) and placed a premium on concrete, testable statements very different from those found in poems. Some of the most influential modern critics, notably [I.A. Richards](#) in his early works, have accepted this value order and have confined themselves to behavioristic study of how literature stimulates the reader's feelings. A work of literature, for them, is no longer something that captures an external or internal reality, but is merely a locus for psychological operations; it can only be judged as eliciting or failing to elicit a desired response.

[Oratory](#), the art of persuasion, was long considered a great literary art. The oratory of Native Americans, for instance, is famous, while in Classical Greece, [Polymnia](#) was the muse sacred to poetry and oratory. Rome's great orator [Cicero](#) was to have a [decisive](#) influence on the development of English prose style. [Abraham Lincoln](#)'s [Gettysburg Address](#) is known to every American schoolchild. Today, however, oratory is more usually thought of as a craft than as an art. Most critics would not admit advertising copywriting, purely commercial [fiction](#), or [cinema](#) and television scripts as accepted forms of literary expression, although others would hotly dispute their exclusion. The test in individual cases would seem to be one of enduring satisfaction and, of course, truth. Indeed, it becomes more and more difficult to categorize literature, for in modern civilization words are everywhere. Humans are subject to a continuous flood of [communication](#). Most of it is fugitive, but here and there—in [high-level](#) journalism, in television, in the cinema, in commercial fiction, in westerns and detective stories, and in plain, expository prose—some writing, almost by accident, achieves an aesthetic satisfaction, a depth and relevance that entitle it to stand with other examples of the art of literature.

## CONCLUSION

The evolution of literary criticism is a fascinating journey that reflects the ever-changing landscape of human thought and experience. From the ancient focus on morality

and ethics to the postmodern exploration of subjectivity and power structures, literary criticism has consistently adapted to address the concerns of its time.

By constantly engaging with literature from diverse viewpoints, literary criticism offers a rich tapestry of interpretations, challenges assumptions, and fosters a deeper understanding of human nature and the world around us. The field's ongoing evolution ensures that it remains a vital tool for understanding and appreciating the power of literature to inspire, challenge, and shape human thought and experience.

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