

# PONNUSAMY NADAR COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCE

## DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

### LITERARY CRITICISM 305C6A

Classical literary criticism, as established by **Plato, Aristotle, and Sir Philip Sidney**, centres on the nature and function of poetry and the concept of *mimesis* (imitation). While Plato was highly critical of poetry, Aristotle offered a defence and systematic analysis, which was later championed by Sidney in the Renaissance.

#### I. Plato (c. 427–347 BCE)

Plato, an idealist philosopher, discussed his views on poetry primarily in the *Republic* (especially Book X) and other dialogues like *Ion* and *Phaedrus*. His criticism is rooted in his metaphysical "Theory of Forms" and ethical concerns for the ideal state.

##### Key Concepts:

- **Theory of Mimesis (Imitation):** Plato argues that art is an imitation of a copy, twice removed from reality.
  - **Reality:** The eternal, perfect Forms (e.g., the Form of a bed).
  - **Physical World:** Particular objects in the sensible world (a carpenter's bed, an imperfect copy of the Form).
  - **Art:** A representation of a physical object (a painter's or poet's description of a bed, a copy of a copy).
- **Objections to Poetry:**
  - **Metaphysical/Ontological:** Poetry is far from the truth and deals only with superficial appearances, not the ideal forms.
  - **Moral/Ethical:** Poetry appeals to the baser emotions (pity, fear, lust) rather than reason, potentially corrupting individuals and society. He argued that poets like Homer should be banished from the ideal state.
  - **Intellectual:** Poets lack true knowledge of the subjects they write about; they only imitate.
  - **Inspiration (Poetic Fury):** In *Ion*, Plato suggests poets write not by skill or knowledge, but by divine inspiration or a form of madness, which makes their work unreliable as a source of truth.

#### II. Aristotle (c. 384–322 BCE)

Aristotle, Plato's pupil, responded to his teacher's charges, particularly in his work *Poetics*. His approach was more empirical and analytical, and he defended poetry as a valuable form of human expression and learning.

##### Key Concepts:

- **Mimesis as a Creative Process:** Aristotle accepted that poetry is a form of imitation, but he gave the term a new meaning. To him, mimesis is a natural human instinct and a creative act where the poet represents life not just as it is, but as it might be or ought to be

(representing universal truths). This makes poetry more philosophical and serious than history, which merely records facts.

- **Function of Poetry (Catharsis):** The purpose of tragedy, in particular, is to arouse emotions of **pity and fear** in the audience and then provide a **catharsis** (purgation or healthy release) of those emotions. This has a positive psychological and social effect, contrary to Plato's view that it corrupts.
- **Organic Unity and Plot:** Aristotle emphasized that a work of art should have organic unity, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. He considered plot (mythos) the most important element of tragedy, the "soul" of the drama.
- **Tragedy as the Highest Form:** He declared tragedy superior to epic poetry because it has all the epic elements plus music and spectacle, and achieves its effect within a limited time frame, making it more focused and intense.

### III. Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586)

Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* (also known as *The Defence of Poesie*) was written during the Renaissance to defend poetry against Puritan attacks, such as Stephen Gosson's *The School of Abuse*. He drew heavily on classical ideas, especially Aristotle's, to champion the value of poetry.

#### Key Concepts:

- **Poet as "Maker":** Sidney emphasised the Greek root of "poet" (*poiein*, to make) and the Roman term *Vates* (prophet/diviner) to highlight the poet's creative power, almost god-like, to create a "golden" world better than nature's "brazen" world.
- **Function: "To Teach and Delight":** Sidney argues the chief function of poetry is moral instruction combined with pleasure, making virtue attractive and accessible to the reader.
- **Superiority over Philosophy and History:** Poetry is better than philosophy because it provides not just abstract precepts, but also concrete examples (unlike history, which is tied to mere facts), presented engagingly and emotionally, that move people to virtuous action.
- **Defence Against Plato:** Sidney directly addresses Plato's banishment of poets, arguing that Plato was not against poetry itself but the abuse of poetry by some contemporary writers. Sidney insists that poetry, when used correctly, is a force for good.

#### Comparative Overview

Feature	Plato	Aristotle	Sir Philip Sidney
<b>View of Mimesis</b>	Servile copying, imitation of a copy (twice removed from reality).	Creative representation of universal truths; an innate human instinct.	A divine creative act; the poet creates a "golden" world better than nature.
<b>Value of Poetry</b>	Low (morally, intellectually, emotionally)	High (philosophical, learning and emotional health).	Highest of all (the "monarch of all

dangerous); should be censored or banished.

sciences"); socially and morally useful.

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<b>Function</b>	Appeals to emotion over reason corrupt the soul.	Provides <i>catharsis</i> (purification of emotions like pity and fear).	"To teach and delight," moving readers to virtuous action.
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<b>Approach</b>	Idealistic, metaphysical, ethical.	Empirical, analytical, aesthetic.	Moralistic, humanist, defending the social utility of art.
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The 19th century in literary criticism was marked by the shift from Neoclassicism to **Romanticism**, a movement that emphasised emotion, imagination, and individualism over reason, rules, and social convention. The figures discussed below represent this transition and the core ideas of the new era.

### **Dr Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)**

While chronologically an 18th-century figure, Dr. Samuel Johnson's work represents the pinnacle of Neoclassical criticism and serves as a vital contrast to the Romantics who followed. He dominated the latter half of the 18th century, a period often called "The Age of Johnson".

- **Key Concepts:**

- **Universality and "General Nature":** Johnson's primary critical standard was the "just representation of general nature". He believed great literature should depict universal human passions and experiences, not specific oddities or eccentricities. He praised Shakespeare for being the "poet of nature" in this regard, whose characters are a "species" rather than individuals.
- **Morality and Didacticism:** Johnson firmly held that the "end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing". Literature, for him, had a serious moral purpose and a responsibility to promote piety and virtue, chastising failings and commending good behavior.
- **Practical Criticism and Neoclassical Rules:** Johnson was a practical critic who evaluated literature by its effect on the reader and its adherence to human experience, rather than strict, rigid classical rules. In his *Preface to Shakespeare*, he famously defended Shakespeare's violation of the unities of time and place, arguing that audiences could use their imagination to accept shifts in location and time, as long as the unity of action was maintained.

- **Major Works:** *Preface to Shakespeare, Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (Lives of the Poets)*, and his periodical essays in *The Rambler*.

### **William Wordsworth (1770–1850)**

William Wordsworth is a foundational figure of the Romantic movement, and his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" (1800, expanded in 1802) is widely considered its manifesto. His criticism shifted the focus from the work's adherence to classical rules to the poet's inner experience and the nature of the creative process.

- **Key Concepts:**

- **Poetry as "Spontaneous Overflow of Powerful Feelings":** In his most famous definition, Wordsworth argued that all good poetry originates from "emotion, recollected in tranquillity". The process involves experiencing an intense emotion, contemplating it later in a state of calm, and then the composition arising from a "kindred emotion".
- **Ordinary Life and Language:** Wordsworth advocated for choosing "incidents and situations from common life" as the subject matter for poetry. He insisted that the language of poetry should be a "selection of language really used by men," specifically the simple, unadorned language of the rustic, lower and middle classes, believing it to be more permanent and closer to nature.
- **The Poet's Role:** He defined the poet as "a man speaking to men," but one with "more than usual organic sensibility" and a greater power of imagination and expression than the average person. The poet's role is to keep readers emotionally and morally sensitive and to help them find beauty in the everyday world.
- **Major Work:** *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (essay).

### **Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834)**

Coleridge, Wordsworth's collaborator on *Lyrical Ballads*, was another key theorist of Romanticism. His major critical work, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), is a complex exploration of the imagination, a response to and critique of some of Wordsworth's ideas.

- **Key Concepts:**

- **Imagination vs. Fancy:** This is Coleridge's most important contribution.
  - **Fancy:** A mechanical process involving memory, assembling pre-existing ideas and images into new combinations, but without true creative power.
  - **Imagination:** A vital, organic, and creative power. He distinguished between the "primary imagination" (the fundamental human power of perception) and the "secondary imagination" (the poetic power that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create" and harmonizes disparate elements into a unified whole).
- **"Willing Suspension of Disbelief":** To explain how readers engage with supernatural or fantastical literature (like his poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*), Coleridge coined this famous phrase. He argued that the reader must willingly set aside their skepticism to give "poetic faith" to the work, allowing for aesthetic pleasure.

- **Critique of Wordsworth's Diction:** Coleridge disagreed with Wordsworth's assertion that there is no essential difference between the language of prose and poetry, arguing that poetry, even in simple form, involves a higher, more carefully selected use of language.
- **Major Work:** *Biographia Literaria*.

### John Keats (1795–1821)

Keats's critical insights are not found in formal essays but in his extensive, insightful letters. He was a "second-generation" Romantic poet whose ideas focused on the poet's character, or lack thereof, and the nature of artistic creation.

- **Key Concepts:**

- **Negative Capability:** This is Keats's most famous critical concept, described in a letter to his brothers in 1817. It is the artist's ability to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason". A great poet is content with uncertainty and ambiguity and does not impose a clear philosophical agenda or their own ego onto the work.
- **Poetic Character:** Keats believed the "poetical Character" has no identity itself; it is a chameleon, capable of inhabiting and expressing the nature of others. It is delighted with both "light and shade, well-being and woe". This contrasts with Wordsworth's more defined view of the poet's self.
- **Sensuousness and Beauty:** Keats emphasised the importance of sensory experience and the pursuit of Beauty as a primary poetic goal. For him, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and art should be appreciated for its own sake rather than for a direct moral lesson.
- **Major Critical "Works":** His personal letters to friends and family.

The 20th century witnessed an explosion of literary theories that fundamentally changed how literature is read, moving beyond the author's biography or historical context to focus on the text itself, its underlying structures, and its relationship to power and culture.

### Formalism and New Criticism

These movements share a core belief in the **autonomy of the literary text** and the method of **close reading**. They reject external influences like authorial intent, historical background, or reader response.

- **Russian Formalism (c. 1910s–1930s):** Focused intensely on literary *form* over content, treating literature as a special use of language distinct from everyday speech. Key concepts include:
  - **Literariness:** The specific features (devices, structure, rhythm) that make a work "literature".
  - **Defamiliarisation (Ostranenie):** The technique of presenting everyday things in an unfamiliar or strange way to enhance perception and make the "stone stony" again.
  - **Proponents:** Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Vladimir Propp.

- **New Criticism (c. 1930s–1960s, primarily US & UK):** While sharing Formalism's focus on the text, New Criticism viewed the work as a self-contained, "organic whole" where form and content are inseparable.
  - **Key Concepts:**
    - **Close Reading:** Meticulous analysis of the text's language, imagery, paradox, irony, and tension to find a unified meaning.
    - **Intentional Fallacy:** The error of interpreting a text based on the author's intentions.
    - **Affective Fallacy:** The error of interpreting a text based on the reader's emotional response.
  - **Proponents:** T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt.

## Marxism

Rooted in the socio-economic theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Marxist criticism analyzes literature through the lens of **class struggle, economic systems, and power structures**.

- **Key Concepts:**
  - **Base and Superstructure:** Society is divided into the economic "base" (means of production) and the cultural/ideological "superstructure" (law, politics, art, literature). Literature is part of the superstructure and reflects or influences the economic base.
  - **Ideology/Hegemony:** Literature often serves to naturalize the dominant worldview (ideology or hegemony) of the ruling class, but it can also expose social inequalities.
  - **Class Struggle:** The central focus is on how texts portray or participate in the conflict between the *bourgeoisie* (owners of production) and the *proletariat* (working class).
  - **Proponents:** Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson.

## New Historicism

Emerging in the 1980s as a reaction against New Criticism's textual isolation, New Historicism views literature as being in a dynamic, reciprocal relationship with other cultural and historical texts of its time.

- **Key Concepts:**
  - **Culture as a "Web":** Literature is not elevated above non-literary texts (diaries, legal documents, sermons, etc.); all are part of a continuous "web" of circulating social energy and power.
  - **Power Dynamics:** New Historicists analyze how literature both reflects and actively participates in cultural power dynamics, often subtly reinforcing or challenging state authority and dominant ideologies.
  - **Contextual Analysis:** The goal is to "reconstruct the actual relations in which people lived during a particular time" by reading literary and non-literary texts *together*.

- **Proponents:** Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Adrian Montrose.

## Modernism and Postmodernism

These terms refer more to literary periods and artistic sensibilities than specific critical methodologies, though they profoundly influenced critical theory.

- **Modernism (c. 1900–1950s):**

- **Characteristics:** Characterised by a break from traditional forms, a sense of disillusionment, themes of alienation, fragmentation, and an emphasis on subjective experience and technical experimentation.
- **Critical Impact:** Modernist critics like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound valued tradition but sought new, rigorous critical standards, paving the way for New Criticism. They saw art as a sophisticated, autonomous object.

- **Postmodernism (c. 1950s–present):**

- **Characteristics:** A scepticism of grand narratives or absolute truths, pastiche, intertextuality, metafiction, and a blurring of high and low culture.
- **Critical Impact:** Postmodern thought underpins many contemporary theories (like Post-Structuralism), questioning objectivity, challenging established canons, and embracing multiple, often conflicting, interpretations.

## Structuralism

Originating in the 1950s, Structuralism applies the principles of structural linguistics to literature, viewing texts not as unique creations but as part of a larger system of signs.

- **Key Concepts:**

- **Language as a System (Saussure):** Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, which distinguishes between *langue* (the overall system of language) and *parole* (individual utterance).
- **Sign, Signifier, Signified:** A sign is made of a *signifier* (the sound/image of a word) and a *signified* (the concept it represents). The relationship is arbitrary, maintained by convention within the system.
- **Meaning through Difference:** Meaning comes from the relationship and difference between signs within the structure, not an external reality. The focus shifts from the author to the underlying structure that enables meaning.
- **Proponents:** Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss (anthropology), Roland Barthes (early work).

## Post-Structuralism

Evolving from Structuralism in the late 1960s, Post-Structuralism critiques the idea of stable, knowable structures and fixed meanings, leading to the "critical turn".

- **Key Concepts:**

- **Deconstruction:** The primary method (associated with Derrida) for analyzing texts to show how internal contradictions and the instability of language undermine any single, coherent meaning. Texts "deconstruct" themselves.

- **Death of the Author:** Roland Barthes argued that the author's intended meaning is irrelevant; the text is a "tissue of quotations" that the reader must navigate, freeing the text from a single origin.
- **Power/Knowledge (Foucault):** Michel Foucault analyzed the relationship between power and knowledge, arguing that discourses (ways of talking about subjects) create systems of power and control.
- **Proponents:** Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva.

The latter half of the 20th century saw the rise of critical approaches that focused on identity, power dynamics, the body, and the environment. These theories expanded the scope of literary study to challenge traditional notions of authorship, gender, race, and nature.

### Psychoanalytic Criticism

Drawing heavily on the work of Sigmund Freud and later theorists like Jacques Lacan, psychoanalytic criticism analyses literature as a reflection of the unconscious mind of the author, characters, or even the culture itself.

- **Key Concepts (Freudian):**

- **The Unconscious, Id, Ego, Superego:** The mind is structured into the primal, desire-driven *id*; the rational *ego*; and the moral *superego*. Texts can be read to uncover the conflicts between these elements.
- **Oedipus Complex:** The universal human desire for the parent of the opposite sex and rivalry with the same-sex parent, a theme frequently explored in tragedy (e.g., *Oedipus Rex*).
- **Defence Mechanisms and Symbolism:** Dreams, slips of the tongue (*Freudian slips*), and literary symbols are seen as expressions of repressed desires or anxieties that the conscious mind cannot directly confront.

- **Key Concepts (Lacanian):**

- **The Mirror Stage:** A crucial moment in infant development where the child recognises themselves as a unified self, leading to the formation of the ego.
- **The Symbolic Order:** The entry into language, law, and culture, which simultaneously alienates the subject from a primal sense of unity.

- **Proponents:** Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Norman Holland, Shoshana Felman.

### Feminist Theories

Feminist criticism analyzes literature through the lens of gender relations, focusing on the portrayal of women, the historical exclusion of female authors from the canon, and the ways literature perpetuates patriarchal norms.

- **Key Concepts:**

- **Patriarchy and Misogyny:** Examining how societal structures historically disadvantage women and how texts reinforce or challenge these systems.
- **"Gynocriticism":** A movement focused on establishing a female literary tradition, identifying a distinct female aesthetic, and recovering forgotten works by women authors (e.g., the work of Elaine Showalter).

- **Gender and Sex:** Distinguishing between biological sex and socially constructed *gender* roles.
- **The Female Body and "Écriture féminine":** A strand of French feminist thought that explores a unique "female writing" style linked to the body and non-linear logic, aiming to disrupt traditional male-dominated language systems.
- **Proponents:** Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler (who shifted the focus to performance theory).

## Postcolonialism

Postcolonial criticism emerged to analyze the cultural and political legacy of colonialism and imperialism, examining the literature produced by both the colonizing nations and the former colonies.

- **Key Concepts:**
  - **Orientalism:** Edward Said's seminal concept describing the Western style of thought for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the "Orient" (the East), creating a false, exoticized "other".
  - **The Subaltern:** Coined by Antonio Gramsci and developed by Gayatri Spivak, this term refers to oppressed or marginalized groups whose voices cannot be heard or represented within colonial discourse ("Can the Subaltern Speak?").
  - **Hybridity and Mimicry:** Homi Bhabha's concepts exploring the complex blending of colonizer and colonized cultures. *Mimicry* is the colonized subject's partial imitation of the colonizer, which simultaneously mocks and destabilizes colonial power.
  - **Decolonization of the Mind:** Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's emphasis on the need for postcolonial nations to reclaim indigenous languages and cultural practices to fully escape colonial mental slavery.
- **Proponents:** Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon, Derek Walcott.

## Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that began to formalize in the late 1980s and 1990s, analyzing the relationship between literature and the physical environment, treating nature not just as a backdrop but as a vital theme in itself.

- **Key Concepts:**
  - **Anthropocentrism vs. Ecocentrism:** Challenging the human-centered worldview (anthropocentrism) and advocating for an earth-centered ethical framework (ecocentrism).
  - **The "Nature" Construct:** Examining how definitions of "wilderness," "nature," and the "pastoral" are historically and culturally constructed rather than objective realities.
  - **Environmental Justice:** Analyzing texts for how environmental burdens are often unequally distributed among different social classes or races.
  - **Gothic Ecology/Toxic Discourse:** Studying how modern literature addresses pollution, environmental catastrophe, and the anxiety surrounding the climate crisis.

- **Proponents:** Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, Lawrence Buell, Ursula Heise.

<b>Period / Movement</b>	<b>Key Figures</b>	<b>Primary Focus</b>	<b>Main Concept/Methodology</b>
<b>Neoclassicism</b>	Dr. Samuel Johnson	Morality, universality, reason	"General nature"; literature must "instruct by pleasing"; adherence to standards of taste and reason.
<b>Romanticism</b>	Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats	Emotion, imagination, individualism	"Spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"; Imagination vs. Fancy; Negative Capability; focus on the author's inner state.
<b>Formalism &amp; New Criticism</b>	Shklovsky, Eliot, Brooks, Ransom	The text itself (autonomy)	Close reading; <i>Defamiliarization</i> ; Organic Unity; Intentional/Affective Fallacies (rejecting author/reader focus).
<b>Marxism</b>	Marx, Althusser, Terry Eagleton	Class struggle, economics, power	Base & Superstructure; how literature reinforces or challenges dominant <i>ideology</i> and <i>hegemony</i> .
<b>New Historicism</b>	Stephen Greenblatt	History, culture, power circulation	Literature and non-literary texts are part of a unified cultural "web"; reciprocal relationship between art and power.
<b>Modernism</b>	Woolf, Joyce, Eliot (authors)	Fragmentation, alienation, experimentation	Break from tradition; complex narrative forms; focus on subjective experience; art as autonomous object.
<b>Postmodernism</b>	Barthes, Foucault (associated ideas)	Skepticism of absolute truth/narrative	Pastiche, intertextuality, blurring of high/low culture; questioning objectivity and authorship.
<b>Structuralism</b>	Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, early Barthes	Language systems, underlying structure	<i>Langue</i> vs. <i>Parole</i> ; meaning derived from difference between signs within a closed system.

<b>Post-Structuralism</b>	Derrida, Foucault, Spivak	Instability of meaning, power/knowledge	<i>Deconstruction</i> (undermining fixed meaning); "Death of the Author"; power dynamics inherent in discourse.
<b>Psychoanalytic</b>	Freud, Lacan	The unconscious mind, desire, repression	Id, Ego, Superego; Oedipus Complex; analysis of symbols as expressions of repressed anxieties or desires.
<b>Feminist Theories</b>	Beauvoir, Showalter, Cixous	Gender, patriarchy, female experience	Gynocriticism; Sex vs. Gender; <i>Écriture féminine</i> ; challenging male-dominated literary canons.
<b>Postcolonialism</b>	Said, Spivak, Bhabha	Imperialism, race, cultural identity	<i>Orientalism</i> ; the <i>Subaltern</i> voice; <i>Hybridity</i> and <i>Mimicry</i> ; analyzing the power dynamics of colonization.
<b>Ecocriticism</b>	Glotfelty, Buell	Nature, environment, ecology	Challenging <i>anthropocentrism</i> ; the cultural construction of "wilderness"; environmental justice in texts.