

Why does the modern world need literary critics?

Literary criticism holds its roots in the well-informed deliberation of published literature, interpreting both the meaning of the piece, as well as providing an insight or judgement into the quality of the written work, as performed by the critic. This applies to any argumentations about literature, and can take the form of book reviews, essays, in-depth studies and more. I believe the critic's responsibility does not lie in aligning their viewpoint to that of the author, but in providing an exacting standard of judgement alongside their personal interpretations, for the reader to benefit from. The primary values of modern literary criticism are the increased diversity of opinions that do not strictly adhere to the originally intended meaning behind a piece of literature. Modern society has progressed significantly since the first evidence of literary criticism which dates back to the time of Plato, as can be identified in his criticism of poetry in 'The Republic', allowing for a wider range of interpretations and perspectives.

French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes believes that there are two primary methods of approaching criticism. In his essay 'The Death of the Author', Barthes argued that 'once the Author is discovered, the text is explained: the critic has conquered'. Essentially, his writing places an attack on the focus of traditional literary criticism, which attempts to almost purely retrace and uncover the author's original intentions behind their writing. However, in a modern environment it seems increasingly necessary to incorporate a more diverse approach; 'diversity' here meaning where the interaction between the reader and the critic enhances the original text due to the contribution of their individual perceptions. This allows the primary text to gain more value in the newfound accessibility to further interpretation. Meaning in literature is not something to be discovered once and directly translated, but rather something that is spontaneously created upon the active reading and understanding of a text, later shared by the critic.

This viewpoint proclaims that once the text is published, the author no longer plays the primary role. This is passed on to the reader and the critic to be deciphered from numerous different angles, as Barthes declared: 'the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination', where the value then has the potential to reach new heights.

Barthes' theory is put into practice when comparing the views of Bloom and Eagleton on Shakespeare's legacy. To keep Shakespeare relevant in our times, the modern reader may benefit from some guidance from the critics to maintain his appeal and importance four hundred years later. Harold Bloom strongly supports the traditional critical view by only emphasising the author's intent in 'Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human'. Bloom sustains the belief that Shakespeare always maintains relevance universally due to the original meaning behind his literary works. Shakespeare's ability to write such powerfully convincing three-dimensional characters is the reason why we are able to feel and interpret our surroundings in the way we do today. The calculated meaning behind his writing singularly allowed for a change in the way we understand our feelings today, purely due to

his inherent authorial intent. Therefore, in attempting to apply a modern perspective on Shakespeare's writing, Bloom believes the critic detracts from the original value of the piece. Conversely, Eagleton's 'William Shakespeare - Rereading Literature' argues that the meaning behind Shakespeare's work is ever-changing, depending primarily on the context in which the critic interprets it, incorporating the Marxist, feminist and semiotic ideas of our own time as prime examples. While many critics conform to the lines of appreciating and praising Shakespeare's work for the contributions it has given that are still evident today, Eagleton pays recognition to this but does not let it prevent him from establishing newly arising interpretations reflecting the ever-changing modern attitudes and values. In his critical writing, Eagleton reimagines the meaning behind Shakespeare's literature, using entirely modern perspectives to interpret his plays, as a means of enhancing the amount of value the reader can gain from engaging with Shakespeare's writing.

I believe Eagleton's view promotes a far more profitable insight for a modern reader when assessing the literary work of an author from many centuries ago. By allowing for the intended meaning to be adapted and altered, the reader gains the agency to expand on the original text without detracting any value from the author's work.

This scholarly progress allows for the circulation of different interpretations that are each educational and informative in their respective right. An example of this could be seen when a powerful piece of feminist writing receives critical responses, such as 'The Handmaid's Tale' by Margaret Atwood'. Initially, this atmosphere can encourage emotional involvement with the issues discussed in the novel, which will certainly be picked up on by the reader, and potentially the critic. However, the critic also maintains the power to educate the reader using diverging viewpoints. Modern feminist criticism emerged in the 1960s, and encourages an informative and decreasingly subjective assessment of the way in which women are depicted in literature.

Similarly, postcolonial criticism plays an unambiguously important role in the modern world when applied to literature produced by colonial powers and those who were colonised, for instance Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 'One Hundred Years of Solitude'. When interpreted within a modern context, the critic has the authority to renew the perception and understanding of culture and history, in order to educate the continuously developing views and attitudes of our modern-day society. The value of the critic lies not in writing exclusively objective texts, but to influence the positive developing discussion of inter-subjectivity relating to the matter at hand. Both interpretations can then provide an insight into the social and cultural beliefs surrounding the history of literature, as well as the modern-day context in which it is being read, allowing for a further examination of changes in literary techniques and the attitudes addressed in writing, between texts and time periods.

This widened accessibility to a newfound diverse critical agency is essential in the pedagogical sphere of the modern world in order to improve and challenge the

continuously growing pool of knowledge. Alongside the encouragement of widened inclusivity and diversity in literary education, new voices are welcomed onto the scene that may contrast the more traditional demographic that once dominated the field of literary criticism. This wider acceptance of criticism brings the heart of debate into fruition.

I believe the Nobel Prize in Literature Winner 2019, Olga Tokarczuk, added a relevant voice to the discussion about the role of literary criticism in the modern world when she argued that once a book is published in English, it becomes 'a global publication'. The idea of globalised discourse gives the critics the responsibility to remain informed in their criticisms. In a 'globalised context' critics have the power to collectively create significant debates that are then disseminated across the wider social context of the modern world, and determine how literature will be interpreted. The development of globalisation in the modern world has opened a door towards the fabrication and shaping of a clearer direction of future literature: what needs to come next, both in the literature itself, and the understanding that accompanies it, enhanced by literary critics.

Tokarczuk also vocalised in her Nobel Lecture that 'Life is created by events, but it is only when we are able to interpret them, try to understand them and lend them meaning that they are transformed into experience'. I believe in the same way, literature can only wholeheartedly be transformed into something truly consequential and worthwhile once it is interpreted, encouraging the evolution of understanding among a plethora of other readers, who will ultimately form their own individual perspectives that may stray from those of the critics. There is certain beauty to be found in the spark of education implemented by a literary critic onto those who engage with their writing.

The responsibility of the literary critic holds undeniable weight in both the literary sphere of the modern world, and a more general community of readers within our society. Literary criticism allows for the reader to engage in varied interpretations of a text, without being restricted only to the author's original intentions in writing. This promotes a new and enhanced way of approaching literature; there are no longer limitations attached to a piece of text, as the critic encourages the ability to interpret writing in countless ways. Additionally, the modern world continues to show signs of increasingly diverse voices being heard from a critical perspective, having positively progressed since the time of Plato in which the agency to engage with criticism was acutely limited. Today, the pool of critics is wider and more varied, simultaneously leading to works becoming more accessible to the reader and their ability to engage in valuable debate regarding the primary text. The power of interpretation is highlighted by the critic, enhancing the strength of prominent literary works in the modern world.

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