

‘Why does the modern world need literary critics?’

In order to define what a literary critic is we must examine its etymology: traditionally, thought to be someone who acts as a guiding voice to the public’s interpretation of themes and characters in literary works. Literary criticism has always started with the privileged. It has been an indoctrinating method used by-almost exclusively- rich, white men, restricting the way the masses perceive a piece of art to their own tainted interpretations. In short, it has been an unhealthy practise since the Ancient Greek’s theatrical and literary presence that first ignited an aristocratic interest in art, all the way until a post-enlightenment 19th Century. People saw literature as a way of controlling the public; it is true that even Shakespeare, a figurehead for British creativity, was under the censorship of two monarchs in his lifetime. This is because the socially elite have understood the way that literary interpretations can shape a civilisation: art “is a hammer with which to shape” society (Bertolt Brecht.) Thus, with a background that seems so plagued with elitism, one cannot imagine how literary criticism could possibly benefit an ever-progressive society; however, we need it now more than ever because literary criticism has dramatically improved in recent years as there has been an influx in the number of people permitted to spill their critical ink on literature. By consequence, the modern world needs literary criticism as the modernisation of the exercise is proving to be far more egalitarian and is allowing voices, that were never previously acknowledged, to be heard. Firstly, modern literary criticism invites fresh interpretations of traditional, ‘stuck in their ways’, texts; giving characters that were perhaps overlooked- due to a previously unaccepting social climate- some added limelight. Secondly, following Brecht’s theory that art can have a large influence on society, it is inferable that, by having these new perspectives (through modern critics), we can be guided into a more forward-thinking, progressive society. Lastly, the sheer volume of people who are commenting on literature is giving everyone the opportunity to share their judgements on texts; which will encourage a wider acceptance of different viewpoints: diminishing narrow-mindedness.

Modern literary criticism entices creatives to reconsider and re-shape the meaning of traditional texts. This enables these texts to become far more accessible in a world that has shifted substantially since the initial reception of many of these older works. A pioneer of modern literary criticism, Matthew Arnold, in his book ‘Culture and Anarchy’ classified culture as a goal to work towards for each other and in doing so discouraging any form of elitism or behaviour that enshrines “vanity and ignorance” in the literary world. Since this publication, there has been a surge in acceptance in literary criticism and many progressive approaches to it have emerged. Rather notably, feminist criticism has revolutionised our understanding of texts. Feminist criticism has been extremely influential in the modernisation of older texts; for example, upon Anna Jameson citing Ophelia as an overlooked character in ‘Hamlet’, writing ‘Poor Ophelia!”, there have been countless reformations of ‘Hamlet’. These have focussed positively more on esteeming Ophelia as a major character in her own right. This can be neatly illustrated in how Zeffirelli’s 1990 film adaptation of the play zooms in intensely on Ophelia and her relationship with the eponymous protagonist; it even cuts out many of Shakespeare’s original writings that do not centre around Bohman Carter’s Ophelia. This can be epitomised in how it effortlessly

cuts out most of the scenes which demonstrate the arising political tensions between Norway and Denmark in an attempt to really hone in on the significance of this female character. While these benefits of modern criticism—namely, re-establishing traditional texts in a more accepting context—remain self-evidently beneficial in societal progression, it remains difficult to defend a hypothesis that is brushing past the deep-rooted elitism that plagues the concept of literary criticism. After all, until recent years, it has been accessible only to members of ‘The Clerisy’, on the basis that they were the ‘Intelligentsia’ of the population: claiming that being at the top of the socio-political pecking order granted them a place high up on the ladder of academic superiority. So, as people in society have been excluded from expressing their thoughts on literature for numerous years—solely based on their social class—we cannot excuse this inherent elitism. Nonetheless, I would argue that it is far more intellectually dishonest to condemn modern criticism as we need it in order to move away from this image that literature is only for the elite; alongside it being necessary for contemporizing texts in the spirit of societal progression. For example, if we did not allow for modern critics to analyse scripts and books, we would not be awakened to some intrinsic problems that they have. The esteemed critic, Brett Seekford of James Madison University, sought to widen the eyes of all who have read Harper Lee’s infamous ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’, in saying that it relies heavily on the all-too “common trope” of the “white saviour”: that black people must rely on a white person in order to obtain liberation. This addressal of the marginalisation of a race again shows the profoundly positive impact that literary critics can have and that we need modern criticism to move away from this elitism that laid the foundation of the practise. Therefore, modern literary criticism is vital as it helps us re-shape texts and use them as a platform to point out societal issues that expand beyond the world of literature.

The variety of lenses that critics see literature through, nowadays, is vast; something which can only aid societal progression, in forcing readers to empathise with certain themes. This can be illustrated in how modern literary criticism has called for a warmer reception of works that deal with harsher and more sensitive ideas. For example, without Sigmund Freud establishing psychoanalysis as a pillar of modern criticism, pieces which deal with such phenomena as the ‘Oedipus complex’ and the ‘Electra complex’ would have been regarded with deep judgement, rather than complicated explorations of psychological issues and brave analyses of sexuality. This is evident in how as more critics have attached themselves to the label of ‘psychoanalytical literary critics’ and voiced their application of it to certain texts, there has been a far greater acceptance of more risqué texts. We only need to look as far as D.H. Lawrence’s ‘Sons and Lovers’ to acknowledge the progressively fewer hostile receptions that it has had over the years. As a novel that was initially received in such a bad light that it was banned just two months after its publication—due to its apparent over-comfortability with dealing with sexuality—we can see the great impact that psychoanalytic critics have had in giving it a better name and encouraging people to empathise with its important themes, because now it is regarded as a modern classic (ranked 9th on the Modern Library’s list of their 100 favourite books of the 20th Century.) Thus, without modern criticism awakening the public to these psychological issues, that are revealed through the likes of the protagonist Paul Morel embodying them, the masses would not have been able to enjoy the novel and

treat it as an important steppingstone in British modernism. Additionally, with a rise in critics scrutinizing the biographical contexts of the authors of these novels, our empathy for novels has further developed as when we read the work of an author, knowing their background, it becomes somewhat sentimental. Whether a critic draws our attention to the profound impact that Tennessee Williams' sister has had on his constant references to mental illness in his oeuvre, or James Baldwin's experience growing up in a racist and homophobic 20th Century Harlem as a homosexual and African American man, or Carlos Ruiz Zafón growing up in the shadow of the Spanish Civil War under the oppressive regime of Franco, we are drawn closer to these narratives nonetheless. Therefore, with the variety of lenses that modern literary critics work through- namely, biographical and psychoanalytical- readers have been increasingly more accepting of work that has tried to explore complex and vital issues that need to be heard in order to establish societal progression.

To conclude, there are deep-rooted problems with the elitist origins of literary criticism, which are apparent in the very fact that one had to be among the top of the socio-political pecking order, in 'The Clerisy', to shed their thoughts on literature. However, we are still in need of modern critics, so they can re-establish a good name on commenting on literature. We need modern literary criticism to empower those who have been dehumanized by a cruel literary heritage; we are in an age where they can even encourage fresh interpretations of texts in the spirit of egalitarianism- something which can only aid the acceptance of traditional writings and also dispel detrimental archetypes of certain groups. There are so many different types of modern criticism, satisfying the opening of a health dialogue between people; which, in turn can only create a society of more empathetic readers. Art "is a hammer with which to shape" society and so too is how we interpret it; hence, with the variety of interpretations that we now have our society can be "shaped" away from the dogmatic views that used to plague our understanding of literature.