

Does Literature still need critics? Essay question

A book, written and published with the art and craftsmanship of the author, is released - leather covered, with the age-old sepia tint to each page and sitting prettily on the bookstore's frontline shelf. A hundred years ago, if the book was any good, it would be met with a flurry of very serious, loquacious sets of reviews - written in pamphlets, written in different books themselves, or written in local newspapers. It appeared that any book was not just the book itself, but it was the composure of all the hundreds of critic's reviews that surrounded it. Somewhere, critics pondered on the book's meaning, on the book's author, on the book's intentions and ultimately, with each great book that was created, entire universes of critiques accompanied that supernova. As Cape described it, '[literary] criticism is art's late-born twin', a kind of inevitable result of the publication of something great. After all, if the purpose of literature is to modify our perception of the world, what better way to express this than in the medium we were inspired by?

And yet, literary criticism can often feel like something very firmly stuck in the 20th century, a kind of prestigious activity reserved for Harvard graduates or Oxford men, with decades of time to muse the intentions of James Joyce and plenty of money to persuade editors to publish their thoughts, somehow the Literary Criticism we know seems to fall into the same category as jousting and water polo, something exclusive and elusive we aren't quite sure we can contribute to. The archetypal Orwell, smoking cigarettes and musing philosophical theorems relating to novellas, has been replaced by mass criticism via the digital media. When we choose a book in the 21st century, a plethora of criticism accompanies it - adulating admiration conveyed perhaps through Amazon reviews, or maybe ruthless retorts in the form of Goodreads reviews.

Nowadays, a degree or literary knowledge is not necessary to have a critical opinion. Digital media has made giving a critical review more accessible, and has, perhaps arguably diminished the need for written literary criticism. Why, some may ask, would the public need a writer to spend months musing about a book's importance and publishing an essay on the matter, when in the meantime, there have been hundreds of reviews, YouTube videos and TikTok reviews that all cover the book in as much detail as possible. Cape wrote that 'the explosion of digital communication technology has shaken the edifice of journalism and unsettled the foundations of print culture' meaning the hardy, ostensibly unshakeable importance of literary criticism in the 20th century has been challenged by the modern day accessibility, in the same way anyone can now adopt that once prestigious role of a literary critic, so can anyone be a 'medical profession' online, or even a ballet expert, reviewing the latest production in the Royal Opera House and we are unable to know if their credentials are valid or not.

Literary criticism is faced with the challenge of mass criticism from the public, which is both a delightful prospect worth celebrating and a loss for the literary world in that it allows everyone to submit their respectively valid opinion on a work of art, but it causes a muddle, a chaotic blur of thousands of reviews in which it is difficult to find the reviews that have months of thought and consideration supporting them.

The purpose of critics in literature is to analyse the purpose and value of a piece of literature with their own knowledge and skill supporting them. So, in our contemporary society, is there

still room for valuable criticism? And the answer lies in whether there is still art worth valuable criticism. The art of our modern world demands analysis, inspection, derision and interpretation, and it is through the quarrels of different schools of thought and criticism that we develop our own thoughts and perspectives to apply to the world around us. Perhaps, the criticism for 'Animal Farm' and 'Pride and Prejudice' is still relevant, and the decades-old reviews are naturally still important, as is the early precursors of criticism: Aristotle and Plato but what about literary criticism for modern literature, the books that occupy the public's mind and have become sensational: 'Normal People' and 'Wolf Hall', books that topped literary charts for weeks and whilst perhaps not reaching the dizzying heights of literature excellence as books that preceded them, still inviting mass praise and subsequently, altering the thoughts and perspectives of millions of people around the world. The new, modern literature demands the same level of literary criticism that once surrounded books two centuries ago, the kind of fixation and obsession critics had with the chart-toppers of the 20th century is still necessary today. Literary criticism is not reserved for the antique and the old-worldly, it is an evolving art in itself, and it is the response to valid art. And as art still progresses, still valid and still valuable, we require the response of critics - not reviewers tapping out recommendations on their phone, but the same musing Parisians writing out their sixth draft of a criticism that they did for Nabokov, but now for Rooney or the same schools of graduates flocking to Larkin and Duffy, but now for Zadie Smith and Kennard.

The age-old question of if a tree falls in the forest without anyone there, does it make a sound is applicable for modern day literature, if an author publishes their book, and the world of literary critics are silent, all convinced it is an extinct profession, then do these books make a mark in society, are they valid in the same way books were a hundred years ago? With the decline of printing and the digitalisation of our literary world, it can be easy for the literary critics to be made redundant, or to become lost amidst the review-heavy culture we promote, where a product is weighed and valued by popular opinion. A largely persuasive argument for the need for literary critics in contemporary society lies in the very purpose of a critic, to interpret literature beyond the explicit meaning, equipped with a knowledge they have accumulated through thought and wider reading. In what is often dubbed the 'Age of Opinion' and in a culture that has been renamed the 'Cancel Culture' due to our obsession with evaluating the actions and intentions of others and of cultural work, it seems oxymoronic then to ignore the value of Literary Criticism, which has the very same purpose of evaluating the work of others in comparison with the ideals and opinion of today. Feminist Literary Theory, for example, takes the works of authors from centuries ago perhaps and, for example, evaluates the lack of dialogue granted to women for the duration of the novel, thereby showing the lack of value placed on women's opinion. Great works like 'Emma' where Emma and Harriet Smith, challenged by 'gypsies' are saved by men on horseback, demonstrate an innate acquiescence to the way of the repression and infantilization of women in the 19th century, and whilst these ideas may seem obvious, it is the work of the literary critic who makes them known.

Like archeologists, daintily shifting through hundreds of fragile, manilla pages to uncover the world and context of the time the book was created, thereby revealing a fragment of a world we

may not otherwise know, and contrasting our own, or perhaps even showing similarities to the one we still live in. Even the tropes and templates of modern stories are subject to a range of different Literary Criticism Theories that tell us of our advancement and progression from times we are so eager to separate ourselves from. This takes a work of literature and places it under the lens of the twenty-first century, re-evaluating it and re-considering it. Or, Postcolonialism theory which evaluates novels and literary work written in an era different to our own and can therefore find progression in the literary works we produce in the modern world. Evident in renowned novels such as Jane Eyre, where Mr Rochester makes his fortune in the West Indies and where the foreign wife, Bertha, is used as a foil in her role of the 'the mad, drunken West Indian wife' [2: Meyer, 1990, 252] who even at times is given the pronoun of 'it' and is described zoomorphically, diminishing both her identity and humanity in pursuit of Jane's love story. The range of different literary criticism theories allow for a greater analysis of the method of thinking that went into creating undeniably brilliant literature, but that which may differ to modern opinion and literary critics can present this in a way that allows interpretation.

The pursuit of understanding literature would be stagnated without literary criticism, which acts as a tool to both interpret and comprehend great literature through the lens of contemporary minds and contemporary attitudes. The libraries that are teeming with compelling, fascinating literature are kept alive through re-interpretation, rejuvenated and refreshed through the consideration that comes with criticism. In the 'Age of Opinion', it would seem that the continuation and rebirth of literary criticism to evaluate art is a natural inevitability in our pursuit to understand the significance of literature in all aspects of life.

Sources:

- 1) Cape [2016]: What is the point of critics? | Books | The Guardian
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/13/ao-scott-critic-better-living-through-criticism-film>
- 2) Meyer [1990] Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of "Jane Eyre"
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