
LITERARY THEORY, CRITICISM AND HISTORY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE WORKS OF SOME SELECTED LITERARY WRITERS.

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ABSTRACT

Many writers express their opinions, feelings and personalities through the works of art. Some voice their thought on socio-political issues and philosophy. In a novel, the writer is totally immersed in a word of imagination which is other than his conscious self. He is the medium or an instrument used in conveying a message. It is in the light of this the paper examines the terms "Literary theory, criticism and History in relation to the works of some selected literary writers.

INTRODUCTION

Theory had shifted almost overnight from Lenin to Lacan. Feminist theory, however, was itself by no means unaffected by the general downturn in radical politics which the late 1970s and early 1980s were to witness. As the women's movement was rebuffed by a traditionalist, family-centred, puritanical new right, it suffered a series of political set backs which left their imprint on the theorizing itself. By the mid-1980s, it could no longer be assumed that a feminist, especially in North America, had much more knowledge of or sympathy for the socialist project than say a phenomenologist. Even so, feminist criticism has established itself over the last decade or so as perhaps, the most popular of all new approaches to literature, drawing upon the theories of earlier times to revise the entire canon of literature and break open its restrictive frontiers. The same can hardly be said of Marxist criticism, which since its apogee in the mid-1970s has languished some what in the doldrums. It is symptomatic in this respect that the work of the West's leading Marxist literary theorist, Federic James while still resolutely Marxist in Orientation, shifted increasingly over the 1980s into the fields of film theory and post-modernism. This wanning of Maxism long pre-dated the momentous events of the late 1980s in Eastern Europe when neo-Stalinism, to the relief of all democratic socialists, was finally over thrown by just the kind of popular, revolutions which Western Post modernism had complacently concluded were no longer either possible or desirable. Since this event was one which mainstream currents of the Western Marxist left had been clamouring for a good seventy years, it was hardly an abrupt disillusionment with actually existing socialism in the East which caused the decline of Marxist criticism in the West.

The Works of Some Selected Literary Writers

There are two activities involved in the examination of the issues in this paper. Firstly, literary theory as the principles and method for the study of literature. Secondly, literary criticism as the analysis of concrete works of art. Literary Criticism is however double tiered. It concerns the evaluation of texts and the systematic study of literature in its evolution over the years. Literary theory is meaningless except on the basis of a practical application to texts, while literary criticism is inconceivable except on the basis of a theoretical frame-work. Microsoft

Encarta Encyclopedia has noted five main purposes of criticism since Plato: These include: (1) an assessment of the role of literature in society (2) an analysis of the different genres into their principal elements (3) an examination of the effects of literature on the reader (4) an advice to writers and (5) a detailed analysis of individual works. Plato was the first critic to examine the place of literature in society. He, however, gave no place of eminence to the artist. He vilified him for presenting life as mere imitations of reality a certain remove from the ideal world. Therefore, if art did not represent the "ideal" it was not worthy of the rulers of ancient Greece. This began the age long debate, set off with the contention by Aristotle, that in fact, the poet is relevant in his ability to make us experience catharsis and purge our emotions in our participation in the events of a tragic drama. But Aristotle's enduring legacy is in the recommendation of the three unities of time, place and action.

Horace, the poet and Romantic critic gave his recommendation. Poets, according to him must first make a detailed analysis of the works of Homer and the Greek tragedians in order to perfect the art of poetry. He also recommended the concept of decorum. And this anticipates Wellek and Warren's prescriptive analysis of the role of the literary historian. To them, literary history keeps the critic within the bounds of acceptable standards of judgment. Any critic who ignores this fact goes astray since his is not able to know which work is a derivative of an earlier and original one. This is especially important in the case of the student of literature who requires a firm grasp of the historical backgrounds to works of art which is essential if he is to avoid the danger inherent in repeating the mistakes of the formalists and in a structuralist assessment of works on their face value, deny himself of the wealth which a comparative and historical analysis yields. For example, is it possible to examine Leopold Seder Senghor's negritude poetry in isolation from its underpinnings in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance? Any critic who neglects this important consideration would reveal palpable ignorance about the promptings of this Pan Africanist movement.

It is easy to rejoice even in the traditional content of say, The African Child by Camara Lays, Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe, Efuru by Flora Nwakpa and call them negritude texts but forget that the beginning of negritude, itself is in the black consciousness in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. For that matter, Okara's transliteration Poetry derives from his several readings in European poetry tradition. He eclecticism of Soyinka from a reading of such writers as Bettot Bretch, Gerald Manley Hopkins, T.S Eliot and so on. The experimentations in the novels of Ayi Kwei Armah, Sembene Ousmane and the rest from an older tradition of experimentation. These are verifiable facts, according to Wellek and Warren. But if we say, for example, that Shakespeare is a more accomplished dramatist, than Euripides or that the Romantic period is better than the Elizabethan, we involve ourselves involve judgements. And value judgements are subjective. They are a matter of personal opinion, not fact. In literary history, facts are hardly neutral, being tainted by the biases of the critic. Even the preference of one a distate for notions of historical progress, a pluralist resistance to the doctrinal, merge well enough with that liberal frame of mind.

Post-structuralism is in many respects a much more subversive project than that, but it fitted bell enough in other respects with a society in which dissidence was still possible. But no

one had any longer much trust in the individual or collective subject who had once been the agent of it, or in the systematic theory which might guide its actions. Feminist theory then was near to the top of the intellectual agenda and for reasons not hard to seek. Of all such theoretical currents, it was the one which connected most deeply and urgently with the political needs and experience of well over half of those actually studying literature. Women could now make a unique, distinctive intervention in theory provided that precious link between academia and society as well as between problems of identity and those of political organization which was in general harder and harder to come by in an increasingly conservative age. The 1970s or at least the first half of them, were a decade of social hope political militancy and high theory. This conjuncture was not accident, theory of a grand kind tends to break out when routine social or intellectual practices have come unstuck, run into trouble and urgently need to rethink themselves. The emergence of theory is the moment when a practice begins to curve back upon itself, so as to scrutinize its own conditions of possibility. A theory is always in one an ultimate sense a self defeating enterprise.

The late 1960s and early 1970s was a period in which a new social forces were consolidating certain global struggles such as revolutionary nationalism. And a new heterogeneous body of students and teachers was flooding into academia from backgrounds which sometimes put them at odds with its governing consensus. It is no wonder, then that the Russian formalists, French structuralists and German reception theorists were suddenly in fashion, for all of these approaches "denaturalized certain traditional literary assumptions in ways congenial to the academic new comers. The formalists doctrine of "estrangement" invented to characterize the peculiar devices of a poem, could be extended to a critical estranging of the conventions which they academic institutions took complacently for granted. Structuralism pressed this project to even more scandalous limits, insisting that both self and society were simply constructs governed by certain deep structures which were necessarily absent from our consciousness. The structuralist confidence in rigorous analysis and universal laws as was appropriate to a technological age, lifting that scientific logic into the protected enclave of the human spirit itself as Freud had done some what similarly with psycho analysis.

Valid as literary opinions are and central as shifts in sensibilities remain, it would be riskily to base all arguments for literary history on subjective grounds. Literary history is not all opinion. It is based on the standards and criteria of each age. The greatness on Sophocles or Aristophanes or any of the classical dramatists is delimited by the critical standards and criteria of their time. For, after all, do the prescriptions of Aristotle still hold sway these days? Do writers still observe the unities of time, place and action? The metaphysical convention conferred upon John Donne the greatness with which he is viewed. And John Milton is remembered for his didacticism and moralistic poems not because Christianity or the Roman Catholic Church still dictates the critical tastes today but because of the religious sensibilities of the people of his day. The lyrical ballads held sway in the years of the romantic thought in Europe. And even a cursory statement as, "Horace wrote better poetry than Dante Alighieri" requires that we enter into the minds of the Romantic and Enlightenment societies in order to unravel the critical standards and preferences of the time. Thus, to Warren and Wellek, it is entrance into the sensibilities of past periods requires the exclusion of the

intrusion of our preoccupations and biases. This is the only way we can better appreciate their literature. And writes Samuel Johnson "To judge, lightly of an author, we must transport ourselves to his time and examine what were the wants of his contemporaries and what were his means of supplying them".

This recommendation, however, raises a lot of questions. For example, any appreciation of a point of view is, necessarily, contingent upon a participation into, say, the World of "Garwin and the Green Knight" or participate in the world view of "Beowulf" or "Paradise Lost?" how are we supposed to become participants in the Dionysian theatres of Aristophanes? Or the society of Don Quixote? Is it possible to play Troubadour or partake in Courtly Love? How can we experience first hand, the Elizabethan World of the Globe Theatre? Or, yet again, the battle fields of ancient Greece or Rome? The answer as Warren puts it, is that literary history requires an effort of deep imagination, a congeniality and an empathy with a past or vanished age. It is however, instructive that the act of imaginative reconstruction would always reveal a marked difference from an actual participation in an event. It is even impossible to effectively reconstruct the meaning in a past work of art because such stereotyping precludes the newer meanings which latter societies have discovered in that work. Their structures change with time as they pass through the minds of critics and readers. Therefore, the meanings held for one generation invariably change with another. Thus, as each generation brings to a text its own sensibilities, it passes through a metamorphosis, a transformation and a transmutation.

So Shakespeare's Macbeth Serves for us quite different purpose, for which it was put in the days of Shakespeare. And since the world view has changed, we read Homers Iliad today for quite different reasons as it was read in Homer's day. Even a much later work as Treasure Island gives a different reading now than in that England of Robert Louis Stevenson's. And this reveals a vital aspect of literature its uniqueness in being eternal and historical. Literary works are finite and complete. They are unique in themselves, being possessive of a certain identity. But a converse situation exists in their capacity to pass through some traceable stages of development. Thus, they reveal great possibilities for change. This is also, the task of the literary historian. His job akin to, but clearly different from that of the political historian, leaves the reader with a store of information and a dependable repertoire. For example, all the genres of literature traceable from the earliest time to the present. From the rudimentary days of the orality of the singing bard to the tortured verse of T.S Eliot or Hopkins. From the moralizing poems of Dante to the love couplets of Shakespeare there exists a traceable strain. And even criticism is traced to Plato's Republic in the 4th century BC. And there is a book titled, "A Novel" it is an experience on the European literary stage, it broke with the verse form of the narrative and adapting the prose style evolved as an independent genre. But drama leaves us with a void: Writes Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia:

"The first evidence of dramatic literature dates from Greece in the 6th Century BC....." According to legend, Thespis, a choral leader of the 6th Century BC, created drama when he assumed the part of a leading character in a dithyrambic story, he spoke and the chorus responded. These precedents, as well as the explanation of the process of development is

the duty of the literary historian. But the difficulty which has been admitted by the Encyclopedia is the tragedy of literary history and this, the tragic failing of an art that has nonetheless, meticulously recorded every historical development and incident in the literary world. But now this lacuna, only redeemable by archeological excavations, remains the missing link in the evolutionary chain of tragic drama.

The role of the historian does and merely in this tracing of evolutionary progression. It extends upwards to a contemporary examination of what we have already noted as the unique and eternal nature of art. The contemporary situation and the needs of the society determine the literature that is written for it. Works of art evolve from the social and Cultural situation of the people. Criticism, therefore, cannot exist in a vacuum. It must take into cognizance the prevailing conditions towards societal development. We must note also, that theories do not spring from a vacuum. They are the express results of a process of analysis, interpretation and evaluation of works. Every new theory is a response by the critic to an urgent social need. Every new theory is a direct response to the artistic turns of event in the creative world.

The Eshu-Monkey Dimension

The literary critic, therefore, succeeds not only as an empire but a coach and pathfinder in this delicate task of molding the social psyche. And he is not only just a social reformer but in this explosive (21st Century) age of the multiplicity of literary theories, coupled with the stupendous amount of critical activities on university campuses, the literary critic has become important as an explainer of complex texts to baffled audiences" ^a. Writing in his book, *The Signifying Monkey*², Henry Louis Gates delineates the interpretive dimension of the Eshu-Monkey tale. He concludes that the monkey stands on the threshold of interpretation in Yoruba cosmology. Thus, the critic, as the diviner, holds the sixteen nuts" of explication (revealed by the monkeys) and bestrides that primeval gulf that separates the writer from his mortal suppliants – his readers. The critic is the squirrel's teeth, cracked the riddle of the text. And in these heady, days of the twenty-first century, the reader, completely at the mercy of the critic must as in Eshu Monkey story, worship with lots of fresh palm wine and sacrifices, just so as to be let into the impregnable world of unyielding texts. Whether this is a healthy development, it is impossible to say. But the situation has led a flurry of academic activities on our campuses. And this has left literary criticism strictly in the hands of the academic activities which is how it has been since the days of Plato. This is how it may remain for a long time.

CONCLUSION

The critic, repository of the critical tastes and traditions of the world, would lead the way in the generation of the current of true and fresh ideas right through the years. A critic should be very objective and subjective in his opinion so long as artistic works are concerned.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Critics should at all times use the principles and method of study literature in every work of art. The modern, critics should endeavour to up date the criticisms of the olden day's critics

such as Plato, Aristotle, Horace etc in their artistic work to suit the yearnings and aspirations of the people in the society. Modern writers should endeavour to observe the unities of time, place and action as observed by earlier writers so as to conform to the artistic rules of writing.

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