

Literary Criticism and Literary Theory as Interchangeable Concepts

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Abstract

The study of English is a vast subject area. English literature has explicitly a rich history that goes back centuries to Anglo-Saxon times. Within literary studies, literary criticism and literary theory are considered very important. This article traces the trends in literary criticism and theory from its origins to date. It, then, contextualizes this history in contemporary times. Finally, this article aims to analyze the current scene in literary criticism. Based on the developments analyzed in the field over the centuries, the article presents a systematic breakdown of historical trends and commentary on the current scenario. It is concluded that literary studies can be broadly classified into four distinct periods or stages based on the evolutionary markers of critical studies: non-disciplinary phase, disciplinary era, interdisciplinary period, and the most recent and ongoing transitory stage. These distinct divisions clarify the significant forces within literary and critical studies within each period. They are also helpful in grasping the current trend in the field and predicting the future of English studies.

Keywords: literary studies, literary criticism, literary theory, English studies, literature.

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In Pakistan, English is taught in schools from the primary level. At present, multiple universities are offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in English. Worldwide, this figure runs into hundreds. This stands to prove that literary studies is a blooming and ever-

changing field, just like any other subject area. Within literary studies, literary theory and criticism are vital subfields. Literary Theory and literary criticism are jargon-specific to English Studies departments in universities worldwide. Both terms have deep-rooted histories from classical Greek times until the present age. A logical result of this age-old development in knowledge and practice is a current debate whether the two can be merged or are distinct units of analysis on their own. The present article analyzes literary criticism and literary theory trends and judges whether the two are overlapping or distinctly separate categories. Considering prevalent patterns, the answer to this question of “interchangeable-or-not categories” would throw light on the future of English studies at large.

This article proves the interchangeable nature of literary theory and literary criticism in English Studies, which occurred as a paradigm shift in the last century. The study argues that literary criticism and literary theory hold no disparity in modern times. It leads to where English studies stand as a subject now and in the future. The current article grapples with these issues in literary and critical studies. The scope of this article is extended to teaching and policy areas. Keeping in view the trends in the field, teachers can teach English literature innovatively. The author-centric, reader-centric, and text-centric readings can be mixed and used effectively. In policy areas, especially in Pakistan, literary studies curricula can be designed to boost the study of the subject at par with international levels and create a utility, market, and practical value domestically.

The article is limited to analyzing trends within literary criticism and theory. It is descriptive and qualitative, and organized logically. First, it sheds light on the history of literary or English Studies. This provides the basis which has propelled this critical question about

merging or maintaining disparity between the two concepts of literary criticism and literary theory. Secondly, the article traces literary criticism and theory from their etymology to a brief depiction of trends in the latter half of the twentieth century. These trends have shaped emergent debates about the nature of these concepts and the discipline. Thirdly, the article provides a glance into the discipline's future.

Literary Studies: Origin and Developments

The field of literary studies is rooted in antiquity. Its period spans approximately 2500 years (Goulimari, 2015). That is why anthologies on literary criticism and theories must begin with Plato, Aristotle, and the likes in the classical times. Then they mention the contribution of Gosson, Sydney, and their compatriots in the Middle Ages, Milton and Dante in the Renaissance, and Hume and Burke in the Enlightenment period. After that, the anthologies cover Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Romantic Age and the modernist revival in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Finally, this journey of millennia is concluded in the latest debates and trends of the twenty-first century. Klarer traces the origins of literary studies to the magical and religious texts of ancient times and legal discourses, which she sees as the first major influence on literary studies (1998).

It is noteworthy to mention that the current Western European sense of literature as imaginative writing dates only to the eighteenth century. Before this, literature did not refer to fiction as it now does. Furthermore, literature included any number of writings on any given subject, whereas imaginative writings were studied as examples of language and rhetoric (Culler, 1997). This can partly explain the embittered and dynamic, much delayed and prolonged struggle that had to be endured in the nineteenth century. Finally, in the twentieth century, the struggle led

to the opening of departments of English Studies at Britain universities for studying literature as a subject (Barry, 2003).

The shift from the closed nature of literature to an inter-disciplinary approach towards it is an incident of the 1970s. Prior to this, a change from viewing literature as a Liberal Humanist device to Practical Criticism occurred in the 1920s when I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, and Empson hailed the Cambridge revolution. Later, New Criticism approaches also grounded text-centered approaches in 'fallacies'. But the real boom came in the 1970s with an explosion of theories like deconstructionism, post-structuralism, feminism, Marxism, and later, post-colonialism and cultural studies. No longer was the scholar or critic interested in the form of a literary piece.

The "form" had been dominant in Plato's dialogues. It had been the concern of the Russian formalists in the 1920s. The 70s was the time of criticizing criticism, revising it, experimenting with it, evolving it, and breathing new life. This was partly due to a race for publishing more and more books under one's name in education departments at American universities (Hilfer, 2003). Indeed, the number of critical approaches or theories, the two being synonymous now, that surfaced in the twentieth century alone are more in number than trends that had held sway for centuries.

Some of these trends had been part and parcel of literary criticism, evolving into separate fields; for instance, rhetoric, which was in vogue for some two thousand years, philology, which had its heyday in the Renaissance, and stylistics which experienced its revival in the nineteenth century (Klarer, 1998). Suddenly, numerous trends fashioned into existence for analyzing literature. The critic morphed into the theorist, blurring the borders between the two and necessitating much evaluation and critique.

Current debates in literary studies and English studies concern themselves with the prospect of literature. One such school of thought questions the use of literature in a monetary world. It seeks a quantifiable product from literary studies departments in universities, which can be flaunted at par with technological innovations from science departments' graduates (Klages, 2006). Other disputes center on the content and methodological approaches within English studies. The field is either contested to be a closed study of a text or an inter-disciplinary approach towards texts, based on an amalgamation of texts with outside sources, theories, and ideas (Ipsen, 2013). Ipsen, himself, favors disparity between the two concepts.

Defining Literary Criticism and Literary Theory

This section looks at the etymological basis of the two terms. It then gives overlapping views of critics regarding the two concepts. Finally, this excavation into the roots lays the base for further investigation into emergent trends in the field, which are emphasized through two examples.

Bressler (2007) traces the etymology of the word criticism to two Greek words *krino*, meaning 'to judge' and *krites*, meaning 'a judge or jury person'. Thus, a literary critic or *kritikos* means 'a judge of literature'. A literary critic is concerned with the analysis and interpretations of literature. Klarer (1998) believes that the central term 'interpretation' in literary criticism is derived from religious exegesis of the Bible and legal discourses since primitive times. He views literary criticism as a discipline that studies multiple opinions regarding the 'purpose and applicability of textual interpretation'. Bressler (2007) also divides literary criticism into theoretical and practical criticism. The former studies in theories, principles, and tenets

foreground literature's importance, nature, and value. The latter applies those theoretical principles to a specific piece of literature.

As far as literary theory is concerned, Rivkin and Ryan (2017) believe that it is as old as the hunter-gatherer age when humans communicate and convey stories through images and symbols on walls of caves. In the Greek period, the didactic value of art endowed stories with an ethical function. They see this time as the birth of theory, and Plato is considered one of the first theorists, not critics. This effectively throws light on Bressler's belief that no practical criticism could exist without a theory; thus, the interpretation of every text assumes or theoretical undertone, foregrounding meaning and ideology within a text, known as a theory (2007).

Likewise, Klarer (1998) considers literary theory a methodological approach to a text based on a philosophical premise. Finally, for Klages (2006), literary theory is an umbrella term for various approaches to texts, which isn't something one learns. Instead, it is an attitude towards a text which comes from the reader's worldview. These multiple perspectives closely and inextricably knit together the theoretical base, the literary theory, and its practical function, which is literary criticism.

Differences and Commonalities between Theory and Criticism

There is a simplistic understanding of literary criticism and literary theory. However, depending on which school of thought one favors for literary analysis, one's knowledge of the two terms can vary (Ipsen, 2013; Bressler, 2007). The former can be considered a practical analysis of a specific text, highlighting its literary merits according to set rules and principles. After the advent of theory, these set rules are provided by whichever theory one selects for analysis. The

latter can be considered a universal perspective or a world view that lays the general framework for criticism to function within the literature.

The two are very much like two sides of a coin. A theory becomes more specific when applied to a literary piece. Criticism gains a direction when following the methodology provided by a theory. This is the reason both are used almost interchangeably now. The critic and the theorist are both known as the ‘analyst’. As a mimetic representation of life, literature owes its existence to various viewpoints abounding in the world. The theoretical base to criticism widens the scope of literature and makes it more relevant to readers from diverse backgrounds. But, this overarching influence of ‘Theory’ in the last century has aroused considerable debate within literary studies because some critics see ‘Theory’ as substituting ‘Literature’. Hence, it is crucial to understand the times and trends which helped form and propagate ‘Theory’ to the extent that it swept away the New Criticism and almost all preceding it and effectively-becoming interchangeable with ‘criticism’.

Twentieth Century: Paradigm Shift to ‘Theory’ in Literary Studies

Historically, the value of a piece of literature was determined. Its critical analysis was conducted by studying an author’s autobiography and socio-political background and observing critics' essential comments. The classical and timeless pieces of imaginative literature were analyzed using an ‘author-oriented’ approach towards its study. The focus was shifted to ‘reader-centered’ approaches with the advent of Practical and New Criticism. Then, approaches like formalism, structuralism, deconstructionism, Marxism, feminism, New historicism, and cultural studies shifted the emphasis to ‘text-centered’ and ‘context-based’ approaches for critically analyzing literature (Klarer, 1998).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, critical essays began making references to Freud, Marx, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and the like, and to diverse disciplines like psychology, economy, anthropology, etc. for examining constructs like language, gender, power relations in synchronic and diachronic studies on literature, instead of following the previous trends of ‘author- oriented’ criticism (Klages, 2006).

Hilfer (2003) studies the formative influences on these approaches from the 1970s to 1990s, collectively termed the ‘Theory’. He locates the occurrence of this radical skeptic trend, as opposed to the former ‘retrograde’ movements, in American English departments as a French literary influence. However, France had grown bored of the ‘academically chic’ theory by 1975, branding it as ‘secondhand German thought’. Richard Rorty views ‘Theory’ as a genre, thus explicating: Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macaulay and Carlyle and Emerson, a new kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor social prophecy, but all of these mingled together in a new genre (Culler, 1997). This view projects theory as an entity, borrowing extensively from various fields.

Theorization of Literary Criticism: Applying Theory to Texts

To limit myself to the most pertinent examples, I’d say that if there can be any two theories with the most far-reaching impact in literary criticism, they are those of French philosophers Foucault’s and Derrida’s. Their theories have developed into criticism as Foucauldianism and deconstructionism.

Foucault’s theory of knowledge power as the deterrent of social and cultural norms like sex is an example of analytical theory or ‘genealogical inquiry’. It is not based on any text but is

still applicable to a few texts. For example, the study of Victorian novels' construction of female sexuality and hysteria is an example of literary criticism based on a theory (Culler 5- 16). On the other hand, Derrida's deconstructionism, based on Rousseau's *Confessions*, de-centers textual language, Western philosophy, and the meaning of life in general by proposing a 'transcendental signified'. His theory is practiced as literary criticism, for instance, in the deconstructionist analysis of *Mending Walls* (Culler 9- 13; Tyson 249- 265).

Arguments against Excessive Theorization

The reliance of criticism on a theoretical framework stirred heated debates in academia. Many shortcomings of 'Theory' have been pointed out by scholars in attempts to restrain the excessive influence of theories and preserve the closed nature of literature.

Hilfer (2003) regards theory as devoid of empirical evidence or logic and based on self-contradictions and a sense of privilege, which blinds one to the world view of others. Culler (1997) supports the lack of empirical evidence by affirming through Foucault's example, which is based on a hypothesis and can be tested through plausible examples from real life but has no decisive test of its authentication. Therefore, he considers these approaches to literature as 'dispositions' from a hermeneutical perspective which answers what a text is about.

Theory overturned the primacy of and meaning within the canon, producing liberating and confusing effects simultaneously. While the critic relayed far away from the role of a mediator between text and reader. Because literary criticism became increasingly esoteric, it was grounded in abstruse Theory (Atherton, 2005). Eagleton explains this paradoxical effect of liberation plus confusion by viewing theory as an escape mechanism from life's harsh realities into intellectually terse areas. He also characterizes it as lacking methodological unities and goes so far as to call

both literary criticism and literary theory 'non-subjects'. Atherton supports this claim by providing evidence of English studies in universities and high school at A-levels, proving that English/Literary studies have been a continuation of confusion rather than ideological positions.

Future of Theory and Criticism: Devising Evolutionary Phases in English/Literary Studies

The inevitable interchangeability of theory and criticism, or the theorization of criticism, has expanded. It evolved the discipline and opened new arenas of debates about the utility of literature and its use in the world now. The research has thus categorized the evolution in the academic discipline of Literary/English studies in four broad eras of evolution.

Non-Disciplinary Phase

The first period that existed within literary studies can be classified as 'Non- Disciplinary Studies'. There was neither any defining category of literature as 'imaginative writings' nor any education departments fixed for literature study. Studies during this period were mainly about the use of language according to fixed rules given in fields like rhetoric and grammar by the Greek masters (Culler, 1997; Klarer, 1998).

Disciplinary Studies Phase

The second evolutionary period can be termed 'Disciplinary Studies'. This coincides with the origin of English Studies in British universities (Barry, 2003).

Inter-Disciplinary Phase

The third phase of evolution in literary studies can be called 'Inter-Disciplinary Stage'. This was stimulated by an academic shift in American English departments (Hilfer, 2003). But, again, the dominance of theory is a characteristic feature of this stage.

Transitory Phase

The fourth and present stage of evolution is termed the ‘Transitory Stage’. The present evolutionary phase of literary studies is characterized by debates favoring the expansion of literature. They support the inclusion of texts outside the present limitations of the canon. Plus, it is suggested to merge the genre of ‘Theory’ and literature to form a wholly new academic discipline. Both literary criticism and literary theory have become interchangeable categories during the current period.

Building a Case for the ‘Transitory Phase’

This classification and its characteristics are aligned with Eagleton’s views about theory expounded in his book *Literary Theory: A Short Introduction*. Eagleton (1996) claims that theory serves a political function. Teaching literary criticism and Theory in institutions also helps a political and ideological goal. Still, it cannot hope to erode entrenched capitalism in society or take sides with it. He regards this theoretical and political base to literature as a ‘flight narrative’ which provides the mechanism for change but ironically has not affected any change yet.

Eagleton supports a futurist vision of literary studies as he begins by declaring literature a non-entity and then constructs its existence as an ‘object’, which can include anything of interest to the culture it thrives in. Thus, literary criticism and theory should function equally well for a canonical and a non-canonical text. The job of teachers, scholars, and critics now is to preserve the discourses that have flourished within the field throughout the ages.

Eagleton’s perspective effectively indicates what this article calls the ‘Transitory Stage’ in the evolutionary cycle of literary studies. This stage is the successor to the age of considering theory and criticism as synonymous and is itself the precursor of an age where literature and theory may constitute a new genre or discipline.

Conclusion

In short, this article has argued that both literary theory and criticism have gained traction as synonymous units, just like two sides of the same coin, the coin being literary studies. This interchange has had profound effects on the scholarship within the discipline, which is stimulating fresh debates. Besides, plenty of academic literature is produced each year on theories. Along with this, curricula in universities and high schools are shaped, keeping in view the trends of the field and demands of the time. Finally, the study has given a generic division of this literary development into four broad evolutionary stages to anchor the recent changes into a firm historical grounding and analyze their current nature.

The present stage characterizes a phase where literary theory and criticism are synonymous and a period where theory and literature are also becoming increasingly overlapping.

The present study opens a gateway to future research in English studies. Studies may explore this 'transitory phase' and analyze texts produced within specific regions to investigate their adherence to or deviation from the 'canon'. This will reveal a great deal about the influence of theory on literature and the overlap between them. Besides, innovative teaching practices can be designed to make literature relevant. Finally, curricula and syllabi can be modified and updated to incorporate the latest trends in the field.

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