



# Literature, Language and Literary Criticism: Classical, Modern and Contemporary Perspectives

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**Abstract-** Literature is the artistic shaping of human experience through language, and literary criticism is the disciplined inquiry into how that shaping occurs and why it matters. Across historical periods, critics have debated whether literature imitates reality, constructs it, challenges it, or destabilizes it. Underlying these debates is a persistent concern with language: its structure, symbolism, emotional force, and ideological power. This research paper traces the development of literary criticism from classical antiquity through modern theoretical movements to contemporary critical paradigms. It argues that changing theories of language fundamentally shaped changing theories of literature. From mimetic and moral frameworks in classical thought, to structural and linguistic models in modern criticism, and finally to contemporary approaches that foreground power, identity, and discourse, literary criticism reflects broader intellectual transformations in philosophy, politics, and culture.

**Keywords-** Literary Criticism, Theory of Literature, Language and Meaning, Mimetic Theory, Classical Criticism, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism.

## I. Introduction

Literature and language share an intimate and inseparable relationship. Language is the medium through which imagination becomes form, emotion becomes expression, and social experience becomes narrative. Literature, in turn, refines, reshapes, and sometimes revolutionizes language. Literary criticism emerges from this dynamic relationship, asking how texts mean what they mean and how they participate in cultural life.

Over time, literary criticism has moved from philosophical speculation about imitation and morality to systematic analysis of linguistic structures and, more recently, to examinations of discourse, power, and identity. Each stage reflects changing assumptions about language itself. Is language a transparent vehicle of truth, a structured system of signs, or an unstable network shaped by ideology? The answers to these questions determine how critics interpret literature.

This paper examines three broad phases—classical, modern, and contemporary literary criticism—demonstrating how each phase redefined the relationship between literature and language while contributing enduring insights to the discipline.

## II. Classical Literary Criticism: Mimesis, Morality and Aesthetics

The foundations of Western literary criticism lie in ancient Greek philosophy. Plato regarded poetry with ambivalence. In *The Republic*, he proposed that poetry is an



imitation (mimesis) of the material world, which itself imitates ideal Forms.[1] Because poetry appeals to emotion rather than reason, Plato feared it could corrupt moral judgment. Language, in this view, is powerful but potentially deceptive.

In contrast, Aristotle offered a more systematic and affirmative account in *Poetics*. [2] For Aristotle, mimesis is a natural human impulse and a means of understanding universal truths. He analyzed tragedy in terms of plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song, emphasizing structural unity. His concept of catharsis suggests that literary language shapes emotional experience in constructive ways. Aristotle's emphasis on form and coherence became foundational for later formal analysis.

Roman critic Horace, in *Ars Poetica*, argued that literature should both delight and instruct (*dulce et utile*). [3] This synthesis of aesthetic pleasure and moral instruction influenced Renaissance and neoclassical thought.

Beyond the Western tradition, Indian aesthetics developed profound theories of literary language. Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* articulated the *Rasa* theory, which posits that drama evokes specific emotional states (*rasas*) in audiences. [4] Language functions here as an instrument of aesthetic emotion rather than mere representation. Later, Anandavardhana proposed the theory of *dhvani* (suggestion), emphasizing that poetic meaning often resides in implied resonance rather than literal statement. [5]

During the Renaissance, critics such as Sir Philip Sidney defended poetry against moral scepticism in *An Apology for Poetry*. [6] Sidney argued that poetry surpasses philosophy and history because it combines moral insight with imaginative engagement. Thus, classical criticism established enduring principles: literature imitates life, shapes morality, and relies upon structured, purposeful language.

### **III. Modern Literary Criticism: Structure, Form and Linguistic Systems**

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, criticism shifted toward more systematic and "scientific" approaches. Language became central to literary theory. Russian Formalists such as Viktor Shklovsky emphasized the distinctiveness of literary language. [7] Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization suggested that literature renews perception by making language strange. Rather than mirroring reality, literary texts disrupt habitual ways of seeing.

In the Anglo-American context, T. S. Eliot argued in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that poetry should be understood in relation to a literary tradition rather than the poet's personal emotions. [8] The New Critics, including Cleanth Brooks, promoted close reading and textual autonomy. [9] They rejected biographical and historical approaches, asserting that meaning resides in the internal structure of the text—its imagery, paradox, irony, and symbolism.

A decisive transformation occurred with the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose *Course in General Linguistics* described language as a system of signs composed of signifiers and signified. [10] Meaning arises not from inherent qualities



but from differences within a system. Structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes extended this insight, analyzing literature as a network of codes and conventions.[11] Marxist criticism, influenced by Karl Marx, examined literature as a product of socio-economic conditions.[12] Critics like Georg Lukács argued that the realist novel reveals historical totality and class relations.[13] Psychoanalytic criticism, derived from Sigmund Freud, interpreted literary symbols as expressions of unconscious desires.[14] Later, Jacques Lacan reinterpreted Freud through structural linguistics, asserting that the unconscious is structured like language.[15]

Modern criticism thus expanded beyond aesthetics into psychology, ideology, and linguistics. Literature was no longer merely imitation but a structured artifact shaped by systems of language and society.

#### **IV. Contemporary Literary Criticism: Language, Power and Identity**

In the latter half of the twentieth century, critics began questioning structuralist assumptions about stable meaning. Jacques Derrida introduced deconstruction, arguing that language is inherently unstable and meaning is perpetually deferred through difference.[16] Texts contain internal contradictions that resist final interpretation. Similarly, Michel Foucault examined discourse as a mechanism of power and knowledge.[17] Literature participates in shaping cultural norms rather than neutrally reflecting them.

Feminist criticism challenged patriarchal structures in literature. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* analysed how cultural narratives construct women as "Other." [18] Elaine Showalter developed gyno-criticism to study women's writing traditions.[19] Judith Butler argued that gender is performative, constructed through repeated discursive acts.[20]

Postcolonial theory, influenced by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, examined how Western texts constructed the East as inferior and exotic.[21] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha explored subaltern voices and hybridity.[22]

Reader-response critics such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish emphasized that meaning emerges through interaction between text and reader.[23] Literature becomes a dynamic process rather than a fixed object.

Contemporary criticism thus foregrounds instability, plurality, and the politics of language. Literature is a site where power, identity, and culture intersect.

#### **V. Literature and Language in the Digital Age**

In the twenty-first century, globalization and digital media have further transformed literary language. Hybrid genres, online narratives, and multimedia storytelling challenge traditional boundaries. Yet the fundamental questions remain: How does language create meaning? How does literature reflect and reshape social realities? Contemporary criticism continues to adapt, integrating interdisciplinary approaches while preserving its core concern with interpretation.



## VI. Conclusion

From Plato's suspicion of poetry to postcolonial critiques of discourse, literary criticism has continually redefined the relationship between literature and language. Classical theories emphasized imitation and morality; modern theories foregrounded structure and linguistic systems; contemporary approaches highlight power, identity, and interpretive plurality. Despite methodological differences, each tradition affirms that literature is inseparable from language and that criticism is essential for understanding how texts shape human experience. As language evolves in response to technological and cultural change, literary criticism will remain a vital field of inquiry, illuminating the complex interplay between words and worlds.

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