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1. “Of the Standard of Taste” – From *Four Dissertations*.

David Hume

2. ‘Part 1: Section VII, Section XVIII; Part 2 – Sections I-VIII; Part 3 – Section XXVII’- From *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*

Edmund Burke

Kritika Sharma

“Of the Standard of Taste” – From *Four Dissertations*.

1. INTRODUCTION

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher and historian. Along with John Locke and George Berkeley, he is considered part of the empiricist tradition, which believed that knowledge derives from experience, and not from innate ideas as the rationalists believed. Later in his career, Hume moved beyond the empiricist tradition and came to be known for his radical scepticism, believing that certain knowledge of anything is not possible, and all one can rely on is one’s own experience, which is, by its very nature, limited. One of the most prominent philosophers of the Enlightenment, Hume has been a major influence on a number of later philosophers and theorists. His most popular works include *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751).

The essay “Of the Standard of Taste” is a typical example of Hume’s style. Written in lucid, engaging prose, the essay asks a question fundamental to literary criticism, as well as to criticism in general – Can we devise a common and universal standard of taste, by which we can evaluate and judge works of art? The essay was published in Hume’s book, *Four Dissertations*, in 1757, but students of literary criticism will find that the questions it raises are also relevant to contemporary debates about the nature of art and its criticism. How does one interpret, evaluate, and judge a work of art? Are there universal qualities in certain works of art that ensure their status and longevity, despite changes in times and cultures? This essay, in raising these questions, acts as a great entry-point into the discipline of literary criticism.



2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this lesson, you will be able to:

- Understand Hume's argument about the possibility of a universal standard of taste.
- Explore some questions fundamental to literary criticism and theory.
- Acquire an insight into the basics of literary criticism and relate them to contemporary debates within literary theory.

3. ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

Pages 486-490 (The great variety of taste...over the minds of men)

Hume begins his essay by pointing out that there exists in the world a “great variety of Taste”– diverse people like and value diverse things, and often this like or dislike is not a result of rational processes. In the light of that, he questions whether we can come up with a standard of taste - a standard through which we can evaluate works of art (among other things) and come to more or less universal judgements about them. He claims that it is natural for humans to seek such a standard, which would validate their celebration or condemnation of certain sentiments.

There is a school of philosophy which claims that such a standard is impossible. Distinguishing between judgement and sentiment, this school contends that judgement is objective and universal, while sentiment is completely subjective and diverse. And while there is always one “just and true” judgement about a thing, all sentiments about that thing are equally valid – because sentiments refer more to the perceiver than to the object perceived. Thus, the proverb – “in matters of taste, there can be no disputes” – since, an individual's taste is a matter of perception, and “each mind perceives a different beauty”. Therefore, the same object might appear beautiful to one individual but ugly to another.

Hume, however, counters this school of thought. According to him, while this proverb is common-sensical, its refutation is also a matter of common sense. In literature, for example, there are authors who are universally thought of as better than other authors. Hume claims that no one will dispute the artistic superiority of John Milton over John Ogilby, or of Joseph Addison over John Bunyan. Even though certain individuals might prefer the latter author over the former, those are exceptional cases and would generally be dismissed as idiosyncratic or absurd. And because this opinion is universal, it confounds “the principle of



the natural equality of tastes.” Another proof of this is that Homer is admired today like he was in ancient Greece. The fact that Homer’s works have survived the test of time and are acclaimed across centuries must prove that they pass the standard of taste.

Check Your Progress

1. What do you think Hume means by “taste”?
2. Does Hume agree with the argument that taste is entirely subjective and a matter of personal preference?
3. What examples does Hume use to dispute the argument that taste is subjective?

Pages 490-492 (It appears then ... experience of nations and ages)

Thus, while there exists an immense variety of taste, Hume avers that there are “certain general principles of approbation or blame”, and that one can actually create some standard of taste. There are some qualities in a work of art that are designed to please, and some to displease, and these are more or less universal and discernible. Hume claims that everyone has the capacity for recognizing true beauty, but not everyone is able to always do so. He uses an effective gustatory metaphor here, playing with the other meaning of ‘taste.’ Just as the palate of a feverish person cannot discern the flavours of food, or the jaundiced eye cannot distinguish between colours, the organ of discernment in “a defective state” cannot recognize true beauty. It is only in a sound state that one possesses “a true standard of taste and sentiment.”

Hume then goes on to discuss what these defects of discernment might be. The first one is a lack of the “delicacy of imagination.” Only someone who has this delicacy of imagination can be sensible to finer emotions. Using an anecdote from *Don Quixote*, he claims that there is a resemblance between bodily taste and mental taste. Just like someone with “delicacy of taste” can perceive every ingredient in a dish, they can also perceive those qualities in any object which make it beautiful. Hume suggests that there are qualities of beauty or ugliness inherent within an object, but it takes someone with delicacy of taste to perceive them properly. He goes on to state that any sense can be considered perfect when it can detect the minutest of objects. He claims, “The smaller the objects are, which become sensible to the eye, the finer is the organ, and the most elaborate its make and conception.” And while a palate which is too delicate might not be desirable, a “delicate taste of wit or



beauty must always be a desirable quality, because it is the source of all the finest and most innocent enjoyments.”

Check Your Progress

1. What comparison does Hume make between the taste of food and the taste of wit or beauty?
2. What does Hume mean by “delicacy of taste”?
3. What does Hume mean by a fine palate? What qualities make the organ of taste finer in some people?

Pages 492--495 (But though there be ... standard of taste and beauty)

Hume then goes on to discuss the ways in which the talent of having good taste can be developed and improved. The first way is to practise. It is only through practice, and thorough contemplation of the object, that one can be assured of a delicacy of taste. Only practice provides one with enough experience to compare and contrast different objects and, thus, justly evaluate their beauty or wit. Another requisite, for developing the skill of having good taste, is to be free from all prejudice. The critic should forget all personal biases and emotions and focus only on the work of art. According to Hume, prejudice is “contrary to good taste.” Here, Hume also claims that while ‘reason’ is not a part of taste, it is still useful in deploying one’s sense of taste, since reason dictates freedom from prejudice. Though reason is not the cause of taste, these two faculties often go hand in hand in a person.

Hume claims that while there are certain universal principles of taste, only a few people are qualified to dictate what good taste or what the standard of beauty is in a given place and time. He goes on to define the true standard of taste and beauty as “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice.” It is difficult to determine who these people are, but they always display more sound understanding and superior faculties than all others.

Check Your Progress

1. What qualities, according to Hume, are necessary to develop a fine standard of taste?
2. How does Hume define the true standard of taste and beauty?

**Pages 495--499 (But where are such critics ... defending him against his enemies)**

Though the standard of taste is more or less universal, there are two things that cause variations among tastes – the different humours of different people, and the particular customs and manners of different regions. Thus, some variation in the true standard of taste is unavoidable. People have different interests and, accordingly, different tastes in their estimation of what is good. However, even accounting for these variations, there are still universal qualities in a work of art that can be valued. Regardless of the time and place of its conception, a work of art which represents morality and decency would always be better than one that represents “vicious manners.” This applies to moral standards as well. While moral standards change from time to time, there are still universal moral qualities to be valued in works of art. Of all the variations that space and time allow, Hume claims that those caused by difference of religious sentiment are the most excusable. “No religious principles can ever be imputed to the fault of any poet,” he claims. Even so, he concludes with saying that even religious sentiment is worthy of criticism when it turns into superstition, or when it is used to refer to something banal. Therefore, Petrarch’s comparison of his beloved Laura to Jesus Christ, according to Hume, is ridiculous.

Check Your Progress

1. What, according to Hume, are the exceptions to the universal standard of taste?
2. How should one take religious sentiments into account when evaluating a work of art, according to Hume?
3. Do you think that Hume has succeeded in defining a standard of taste?

4. SUMMING UP

Hume’s essay is part of the empiricist tradition, according to which all thoughts and perceptions are results of experience through the senses. His argument is that beauty and ugliness are not qualities inherent in objects, but functions of the perception of the observers. While he contends that a true standard of taste and beauty is actually possible, it is through more experience that one can hone that skill. The more one reads, the more discerning a reader one becomes. To develop the true standard of taste, one must practise, acquire delicacy of taste, skills of comparison as well as good sensibility and avoid prejudice. Hume was



known for the exploratory nature of his writings. At certain points in the essay, where it might seem that he is contradicting himself, he is exploring an idea in all its possibilities. Hume's essay is not without a few problems. For an author who advises the evaluation of works of art without prejudice, this essay includes a biased, almost bigoted, dismissal of the Koran. Even judgements he takes for granted – such that Addison is a better author than Bunyan, for example – are judgements that seem more common-sensical than based on any objective critical or analytical assessment. Even so, this essay is a significant intervention in a debate that is age-old and continues even now. All students of literature, and even casual readers, contend with the question of what makes a piece of literature good or bad. How do we assess and evaluate literary works? Are there any evaluative criteria that can be objective standards of literary taste? Are these criteria, if they exist, qualities within the text, or do they have to do with the audience? Of course, Hume believes that there are objective criteria which are universal and common-sensical.

In the Introduction to this essay, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, the editor quotes the scholar James Engell's description of Hume's position, in this essay, thus: "The standard of taste becomes a presence that is, in a sense, an absence... Hume is saying that in matters of taste, although there is very definitely at any given time in history a center or a standard, we cannot define or find that center – at least we cannot precisely agree what it is. It is always, for us, decentered." (485) For students of contemporary literary theory, these words would be evocative of poststructuralist theorists like Jacques Derrida. But even for beginners of literary theory, this is an important comment on the essay. Hume's argument can be a bit circular at times. There are certain standards of taste, but he does not seem to exactly define what they are. The essay seems to resist grounding, or a "center" as Engell calls it, because it takes for granted the existence of that which it is trying to prove - a standard of taste. A typical example of the criticism that Hume's arguments, about a standard of taste, face is the scholar Peter Kivy's claim that Hume's arguments are circular. To identify someone as having good taste, it is important to identify artistic work of quality. But to identify artistic works of quality, one needs people with good taste. Hence, according to Kivy, Hume's account often contradicts itself.

While Hume's arguments might face debatably justified criticism, it is important to note that his essay was an exemplary and seminal work of literary criticism, and its influence spans from the 18th century right till the 20th and 21st centuries, where schools of theory, such as Reader-Response Criticism and Post-Structuralism, continue to revisit Hume's argument and apply them to modern literary theory.



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Budd, Malcolm. *Values of Art*. Penguin, (1996). (particularly Chapter 1, which is highly critical of Hume's essay)

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‘Part 1: Section VII, Section XVIII; Part 2 – Sections I-VIII; Part 3 – Section XXVII’, from *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) was a famous Anglo-Irish scholar, political theorist, and statesman. In 1756, he published his first book, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, which was a satirical take on the notion of civil society. In 1757, he published the book that the given extracts are taken from -- *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Published anonymously, both the books became very popular, and the latter brought him a lot of fame. In 1770, he published a political pamphlet in which he introduced the concept of the “political party” as we understand it today. Throughout his career, he wrote a number of books and pamphlets on the subject of political governance. Many of his works advocated limiting the power of the king, but, even so, he was politically conservative. He was a traditionalist and believed that the institutions of monarchy and hereditary aristocracy should be defended; they could perhaps be reformed but they still needed to be preserved. Unsurprisingly, therefore, he was staunchly against the French Revolution. In 1790, he published a pamphlet called *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in which he criticized the revolution and warned against the perils of uncontrolled democracy.

While Burke was primarily known as a statesman and political theorist, his work in the fields of literary criticism and theory is quite significant too, especially his work on aesthetics, of which the prescribed text is an example. Like David Hume and John Locke, he too wrote within the empirical tradition, and believed that knowledge, thoughts, and perceptions are the results of one’s experience. His book, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, is an intervention in an age-old debate on the question of the Sublime. The Sublime is a significant idea in literary criticism and theory, and while a number of scholars in the 18th century have written about it, this is a discussion that began centuries ago. The first noteworthy work on the concept of the sublime is a book, called *On Sublime*, by Longinus, from the 1st century CE. Burke’s work on the idea of the Sublime is significant, as, in his lucid, analytical, and accessible prose, he lays out a detailed theoretical study of the notion of the sublime, which went on to influence a number of later scholars, and poets, like Immanuel Kant and the Romantics.



2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this lesson, you will be able to:

- Understand the concept of the Sublime.
- Develop a clear understanding of Burke's analysis of the idea of the Sublime.
- Acquire an insight into the significance of the Sublime in literary criticism and theory.

3. ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

PART 1, SECTION VII "OF THE SUBLIME"

Calling the *Sublime* the "strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling," Burke claims that anything that arouses the idea of pain is a source of the sublime. The sublime is not the same as terror, but works in a way analogous to terror. Thus, anything that is terrible, or hints at the terrible, can be a source of the sublime. He states that pain is always a stronger emotion than pleasure. The worst torment is always more intense than the best of pleasures anyone can imagine or experience. He also goes on to say that while danger or pain are too imminent and close, they do not give any pleasure, but perceived from certain distances, they can be sources of delight, and, hence, of the sublime.

PART 1, SECTION XVIII "THE RECAPITULATION"

Burke summarises the points made in Part 1 of his book. He states that pain and danger are terrible when immediate, but can be delightful when they do not immediately affect us. He pointedly calls this feeling delight, and not pleasure. The delight that arises from potentially painful things is not pleasure, but sublime. The sublime is not "positive pleasure," which is perhaps pleasure arising from pleasurable things, but is a much stronger emotion, since it comes from instincts of self-preservation. He goes on to enumerate two kinds of societies – the "society of sex," in which the governing passions are love mixed with lust, with the object being the beauty of women; and the "great society with man and all other animals" whose governing passion is love without lust, and whose object is beauty in general. He defines beauty as whatever excites emotions of affection and tenderness in the beholder. The pleasure that arises out of love is often a mixed sort of pleasure: that is, it is not always pure pleasure but often includes a certain sense of loss. Burke posits that this mixed sort of pleasure is different in nature from pain and hence cannot be called *pain*. Another type of passion that he mentions is sympathy, which enables us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, and



experience what they are experiencing. This can cause either pain or pleasure, depending on the circumstances.

Check Your Progress

1. What does Burke mean by the Sublime and what sort of emotional responses does he associate with the concept?
2. What does Burke mean by “positive pleasure” and how is it distinguished from the sublime?
3. When, according to Burke, can potentially painful things be sources of pleasure and delight?

PART 2, SECTION I: “OF THE PASSION CAUSED BY THE SUBLIME”

According to Burke, the **passion caused by the sublime is that of astonishment, mixed with terror**, a passion which cannot be resisted, has a force of its own, and fills the perceiver’s mind with itself to such an extent that they cannot think of anything else.

PART 2, SECTION II: “TERROR”

Fear or terror is the passion which “**robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning.**” A paralysing passion, terror is what Burke calls the “**ruling passion of the sublime.**” He provides the examples of certain words in Greek and Latin, where the same term is used to denote both terror as well as admiration, thereby proving that these two passions are intricately connected.

PART 2, SECTION III: “OBSCURITY”

Obscurity makes a thing more terrible. The **obscure or the unknown is always more terrifying than that which is clearly known.** Things that human minds cannot comprehend clearly, such as ghosts and spirits, cause more dread and fear. According to Burke, a great example of this is **Milton’s description of Death, in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost***, in which the uncertainty, obscurity and confusion within the description makes the object, Death, even more terrible (and hence, sublime) to the reader.

**Check Your Progress**

1. What does Burke mean by astonishment? How is it connected to the sublime?
2. How does Burke prove that terror is the “ruling passion of the sublime”?
3. What is the relationship between obscurity and the sublime?

PART 2, SECTION IV: “OF THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CLEARNESS AND OBSCURITY WITH REGARD TO THE PASSIONS”

Comparing the visual description of an object, such as in a painting, with its verbal description, Burke claims that the verbal description will always affect the passions more, because it will always raise an “obscure and imperfect” idea of the object. A visual description, because of its clearness, will not rouse the senses equally. Thus, words are the most effective tools to rouse passions in the audience, as compared to all other tools of communication. can be seen in ozymandias

Burke begins with a quote from Horace’s *Ars Poetica* which claims that what we see forms a greater impression upon our mind than what we hear. Burke rebuts this argument by saying that poetry is always more affecting than painting. From anecdotal experience, he is certain that poetry is more effective in rousing the passion of the audience than is painting, since poetry is the art form that is more obscure. He goes on to state that “a clear idea is another name for a little idea.” An idea that is finite, and whose limits can be perceived by the human mind, will never be as great as an idea that gestures towards infinity. Using lines from the *Book of Job* as examples, he claims that images evoked by words are more terrible and more striking than the clearest depiction of an object in painting.

PART 2, SECTION V: “POWER”Kubla khan

Burke states, “I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power.” The idea of the sublime is, therefore, inextricable from that of power. Since pain is always caused by a superior power (only that which has power over one can inflict pain upon one), in one’s mind, the ideas of power, strength, violence, and pain are always linked together. Power is sublime because it has the potential to cause terror. He goes on to exemplify this with images such as “the gloomy forest,” “the howling wilderness,” “the lion, the tiger, the panther, or rhinoceros.” These images are sublime because they cause terror. Animals which have



strength that is harnessed by humans and is useful to them, such as the horse, the ox, etc., are not sublime because they do not arouse terror. Wolves, which are wild animals, are sublime, while dogs, which are domesticated, are not. Burke states that any strength arising from “natural power,” such as that of wild animals, is sublime, as is sovereign power or military power. Kings are often referred to as “dread majesty” because they are sources of power as well as terror. He then goes on to discuss the idea of God, or the Deity. He refutes those who say that one can contemplate the idea of God without any fear or terror being aroused. According to Burke, the very fact that the Deity is a source of infinite and insurmountable power, means that He is sublime. Thus, “if we rejoice, we rejoice with trembling” – that is, even the contemplation, of a most benevolent and merciful godhead, is not free from our sense of His infinite power, and therefore, it arouses fear. He cites examples from *The Bible* to prove this argument. Every time God appears or speaks in *The Bible*, he is accompanied by or represented through terrifying natural phenomena – burning bushes, quaking earth, etc. He quotes the Latin maxim “*primos in orbe deos fecit timor*” (fear first made gods in the world), and claims that while this maxim is wrong in saying that fear is the origin of religion, it is correct in identifying the integral relationship between terror and reverence. Power, therefore, is “a capital source of the sublime.”

Check Your Progress

1. How does Burke compare painting to poetry? Which, according to him, is more affecting to the senses? Why?
2. Which of the two is potentially a source of the sublime – obscurity or clearness? Why?
3. Why do people claim that godhead cannot be sublime? Why does Burke not agree with these arguments?
4. What relationship does Burke draw between power and the sublime? What examples does he use to substantiate his arguments?

PART 2, SECTION VI: “PRIVATION”

Privation is the state of lack, the absence of a normally present quality. According to Burke, “all general privations are great, because they are all terrible.” States such as Vacuity, which is emptiness, Darkness, which is the absence of light, Solitude, which is the absence of company, and Silence, which is the absence of sound, are all great as well as terrible. Burke



quotes lines from Virgil's description of the mouth of Hell, in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, to exemplify how images of privation can be sublime.

PART 2, SECTION VII: "VASTNESS"

Vastness is another source of the sublime. Anything that is so great in dimension, as to be almost infinite, is often perceived as sublime. For example, the vastness of the sky or the ocean are sublime images. Burke goes on to discuss this in detail, and claims that depth is grander than height, which, in turn, is grander than length. He claims, though he states that he is not certain of this, that "we are more struck at looking down from a precipice, than at looking up at an object of an equal height." It is not just vastness of dimension, however, which is the source of the sublime. Even littleness can be sublime. When one contemplates the infinite division of an object, or of an infinitesimally small organism, one experiences the sublime.

PART 2, SECTION VIII: "INFINITY"

Infinity is another cause of the sublime. Infinity can often arouse horror in the human mind, a horror that Burke calls the "truest test of the sublime." Anything that seems infinite in dimension, or even an idea or action that is repeated ad infinitum can be the source of the sublime. Using the example of madness, which is often symptomized by an extreme and long-term obsession with a single idea or object, Burke states that infinity has a strong effect upon the senses, and can cause extreme passions.

PART 3, SECTION XXVII: "THE SUBLIME AND BEAUTIFUL COMPARED"

This section begins after Burke's lengthy discussion of the idea of beauty in Part 3 of his book. Here, he compares the beautiful to the sublime, and claims that even though they appear to operate similarly, and though other scholars have often used these two terms synonymously, there are vivid contrasts between the two. Using the terms "sublime" and "great" synonymously, Burke states that while beautiful objects are relatively smaller in dimension, smooth, not obscure, light, and delicate, the sublime is vast, rough, rugged, dark, gloomy, and massive. Beauty is founded on the idea of pleasure, and the sublime on the idea of pain. He goes on to state that the beautiful and the sublime can often be found in the same object, but this in no way proves that they are indistinguishable. Even when found in the same object, these ideas stand separate from each other, and are uniform in themselves, since they are "ideas of very different nature."



Check Your Progress

1. What does Burke mean by privation, and how is it related to the sublime?
2. How, according to Burke, can vastness as well as littleness be sources of the sublime?
3. How does Burke distinguish between the beautiful and the sublime?
4. Do you agree with Burke's conception of the sublime? How is it relevant to one's evaluation and analysis of any work of art, especially literature?

4. SUMMING UP

Like Hume, Burke also believes that universal standards of taste exist. He distinguishes between personal preferences and objective standards and believes that objective standards of beauty and taste exist, regardless of individuals' personal interests and preferences. Also, just like Hume, Burke also believes that while objective and universal standards of taste can be decided upon, some people would always possess more knowledge than others and hence be better judges of the value of a work of art.

As mentioned above, the discussion of the idea of the sublime is an old one. The sublime has been variously defined by scholars of different times and spaces. For Longinus, the sublime resided in an elevated style of composition, and it represented the greatness of the spirit of the creator of the work of art. In the 18th century, there are a lot of tensions and ambiguities surrounding the concept of the sublime which Burke has tried to address in his book. Is sublime natural or a function of art? Is it a quality inherent in a natural phenomenon or a work of art, or does it lie in the experience of the perceiver or the audience? Is it an expression of the greatness of the artist, or the product of the interpretation or response of the reader? Burke's responses to these questions, in his book, are foundational in the history of the concept of the sublime. Samuel Johnson even called Burke's *Enquiry* "an example of true criticism" (Boswell 90). A way in which Burke and other 18th century scholars depart from Longinus's views on the sublime is by locating the sublime not just in the language or style of the literary work, but as a quality inherent in external objects, such as natural phenomena. When Burke published his book on the sublime, the word was used as both a noun and an adjective to describe a feeling or a sensation of awe, or fear, or terror, or a combination of these. According to Burke, the sublime is something which is produced by great works of



literature, or by natural phenomena. Burke also addresses the reader's response to the sublime, which is astonishment, fear, or terror, and the psychological nature of that response. Thus, one experiences the sublime due to qualities inherent in the object that is perceived – qualities that can be evaluated more or less objectively.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Students will find a study of other authors on the concept of the sublime useful to their understanding of it. These include:

Longinus, *On the Sublime* (1st Century CE)

Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764)

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790)

For more on Burke's discussion on the sublime, and on the sublime in general, see:

Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990)

Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (1992)

Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla (Eds.), *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (1996)



Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction” (1925)

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1.1 OBJECTIVES

Virginia Woolf’s essay “Modern Fiction” was first published in 1919, as “The Modern Novel” in *The Times Literary Supplement*, and subsequently included in the first volume of Woolf’s collection of essays, *The Common Reader* (1925). It is considered a seminal text of literary criticism of the modernist period. This unit provides you with a historical and literary context for the essay and a detailed discussion of its salient points. After going through this part of the study material, you should be able to;

- view English literary modernism from a historical perspective;
- understand Woolf’s observations about the modern novel; and
- appreciate her contribution to modern literary criticism.

1.2 VIRGINIA WOOLF (1882-1941): A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Virginia Woolf, full name Adeline Virginia Stephen, was born in London, in 1882. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was an illustrious literary figure of the Victorian period, most well-known as the editor of the sixty-two volume *Dictionary of National Biography*, a compilation of biographies of eminent British citizens. Virginia’s mother, Julia Jackson was a celebrated beauty of her time, who had modelled for painters. When her parents got married in 1874, they both had children from previous marriages. Sir Leslie Stephen, a widower, had a daughter, Laura, who suffered from schizophrenia and had to be institutionalized; and Julia Jackson, a widow, had three children - George, Gerald, and Stella Duckworth. Together, they had four more children: Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia, and Adrian. Virginia grew up in a lively household with ample intellectual stimulation. Her father gave her free access to his extensive library and she was permitted to read whatever she fancied and encouraged to write. As a young child, she started to write a newsletter with amusing accounts about family members, calling it *Hyde Park Gate News*. Unfortunately, her mother’s death in 1895 devastated the young Virginia and she stopped writing. In 1897, her step-sister Stella, with whom she had a special bond, died of complications during pregnancy, which further disturbed her. Later on in life, she spoke up about the sexual abuse she faced as a child, from her elder stepbrothers, George and Gerald Duckworth.



Virginia was a voracious reader, but never had any formal education. Although her brothers went to Cambridge, she and her sister Vanessa were largely home-schooled, as women were not granted degrees by prestigious universities at the time. Sir Leslie Stephen's death in 1904 resulted in yet another nervous breakdown and, for most of her life, her mental health remained fragile. Virginia and her siblings, Vanessa, Thoby, and Adrian shifted out of the Hyde Park home to Bloomsbury, then considered a literary, artistic, and somewhat bohemian district. Friends of Thoby's from Cambridge would regularly meet at their home, providing her with a stimulating intellectual environment. Writers and artists like Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and Leonard Woolf; and the economist John Maynard Keynes, were some of the talented members of this group. They met frequently to discuss art, aesthetics, and philosophy, and came to be known as 'The Bloomsbury Group' -- exerting a strong influence on British art and ideas in the beginning of the twentieth-century. Virginia had started writing anonymous reviews for *The Times Literary Supplement* but her brother Thoby's death, in 1906, and Vanessa's marriage to Clive Bell shortly after, were a further emotional setback for her.

In 1912, Virginia married Leonard Woolf and, under his constant care, continued to write. She published her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), three years later. However, she struggled with manic-depressive episodes throughout her life and attempted suicide in 1913. There was scant understanding of mental illness at the time and it is only in retrospect that specialists are putting a name to her ailment: concluding that she suffered from bipolar disorder.

Together, Leonard and Virginia set up the Hogarth Press in 1917. They published, among others, books by T. S. Eliot, Sigmund Freud, E. M. Forster, and their own work. Between 1925 and 1931, Woolf produced her finest work: novels, short fiction, journalism, diaries, and a biography. Though a successful writer, whose fiction and essays impacted modern fiction and our understanding of it, she could not find inner peace and on 28 March, 1941, she committed suicide, by drowning herself in the river Ouse. It is important to remember that, in spite of her unstable mental health, Virginia Woolf managed to write across a variety of genres and is one of the most influential writers of the modern novel.

1.3 THE WORKS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

Virginia Woolf is regarded as one of the most innovative novelists of the twentieth-century. Her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915) was followed by *Night and Day* (1919) and *Jacob's Room* (1922); which displays the beginnings of her technique of writing in a non-linear



fashion. *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), which is structured around the events of a single day, and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which follows the members of the Ramsay family over a decade, are considered her masterpieces. *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), about a writer who lives from Elizabethan times to the present, was a financial success. Woolf further experimented with the form of the novel in *The Waves* (1931), which comprises dramatic monologues of six friends. *Flush: A Biography* (1933), about the poet Elizabeth Barret Browning's pet spaniel, is written in a lighter vein. In *The Years* (1937), she traces fifty years of a family's history, covering the decline of patriarchy and class. Her last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), which deals with the impact of war on art, was published posthumously.

In addition to the novels, six volumes of letters, six volumes of diaries, and numerous volumes of essays on artistic theory, literary history, and women's writing illustrate Woolf's deep engagement with major issues of the early twentieth century: war, gender, the novel, class, and politics. In her proto-feminist tract, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), she points out women's absence from history, urging women to destroy Victorian ideals of womanhood. In another feminist treatise, *Three Guineas* (1938), she laments the fact that certain professions were closed to women.

Virginia began writing reviews for *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1918. Her essay "Modern Novels" (1919), revised as "Modern Fiction" (1925), is a critique of the older generation of novelists -- such as John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, and H. G. Wells. She labels these novelists as 'materialists,' on account of their misplaced emphasis on creating the illusion of reality. In 1924, she gave a talk at Cambridge called "Character in Fiction," which was published as a pamphlet by the Hogarth press, titled "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown." It is perhaps Woolf's most important statement on characterization in the modern novel. In her essay, "Poetry, Fiction and the Future" (1927), she introduces the principle that novelists need not write of sensational events: any one day can suffice. In two essays published in 1927, "The Art of Fiction" and "The New Biography," Woolf writes that fiction writers should be more concerned with language and design, rather than naïve notions of reality.

Woolf's essays on the art of reading and writing are collected in *The Common Reader* (1925), and a second volume, which was published in 1932. The title is borrowed from a phrase in Dr. Samuel Johnson's "Life of Gray," in which he writes of the 'common reader,' as opposed to the literary scholar or critic, who reads for his own pleasure, rather than edification. Most of the essays in these two volumes had already been published in journals and Woolf declared that she wanted to give structure to, and shape the collection in such a way that its line of thought becomes apparent. Its prevailing theme is fiction. She spells out



her literary philosophy in the first essay, “The Common Reader,” and the last one in the second volume, “How Should One Read a Book?” The two volumes include essays on Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad, Elizabethan plays, and Russian literature.

1.4 BRITISH LITERARY MODERNISM

In the limited space of this study material, it is not possible to summarize the changes that were shaking up the western world at the beginning of the twentieth century. All that can be provided is a quick overview. **Modernism is a broad term that refers to shifts in thinking**, from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the Second World War. The First World War, in 1914, had shattered the belief in the supremacy of the colonial powers: European domination of the world came to an end, a whole generation of young men perished in the war, and Russia was brought to the brink of a revolution. **In the western world, philosophers, artists, physicists, and social scientists had begun to question dominant assumptions about society, imperialism, human nature, and time itself.** The work of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Henri Bergson, Sir William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Albert Einstein, and Max Plank forced people to reconsider their beliefs about God, creation, evolution, and the universe. **Science and technology** too played a major part in rapid industrialization. The airplane, automobile, and motion pictures, as well as humble inventions like the vacuum cleaner and the lightbulb, were radically changing society.

There is an oft-quoted sentence in Woolf’s essay, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (1927): “On or about December 1910, human character changed” (4). In the same essay, she goes on to describe the changes around her:

All human relations have shifted - those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910. (4)

It is generally believed that Woolf is, here, talking about the exhibition of paintings organized by the art critic Roger Fry, at London’s Grafton Galleries, titled *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* (1910). It introduced the British public to the works of Édouard Manet, Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Gauguin. Post-Impressionism was the term coined by Roger Fry to describe these late nineteenth-century French painters, who moved away from impressionism; which involved a faithful recording of light and colour on canvas. Leaving aside urban settings, these painters sought inspiration in rural communities



outside Paris and used non-conventional techniques in painting. Instead of preoccupying themselves with naturalistic depictions, they drew attention to their medium; most famously through visible brushstrokes on the surface of the canvas or by experimenting with perspective and colour. Though not popular at the time, Fry's exhibition influenced many artists and writers, familiarizing them with new ways of representing reality through paint. To appreciate, take a look at Vincent van Gogh's famous painting *Starry Night* (1889), in which the brushstrokes add texture to the canvas. The artist has made no attempt to create a realistic painting -- choosing, instead, to set forth his personal vision.



Figure 1: Vincent van Gogh. *The Starry Night*. 1889. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-starry-night/bgEuwDxel93-Pg?utm_source=google&utm_medium=kp&hl=en-GB&avm=2]

What is most notable about post-impressionist paintings is that the artists dispense with the need to create a photograph-like image. Take a careful look at the next painting: *The Card Players* by Paul Cézanne. Observe how the painter has focussed on capturing the pose of the farmers playing cards and done away with extraneous details.



The elongated figures show a disregard for anatomical accuracy. The background has deliberately been left hazy and one's gaze is drawn to the postures of concentration.



Figure 2. Paul Cézanne. *The Card Players*. 1892/1895. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

[<https://www.cezannecatalogue.com/catalogue/entry.php?id=691>]

It is not difficult to understand why these experimental techniques influenced modernist writers, first in Europe, and then in Britain. An examination of the parallels between the stylistic innovations of modernist art and those of modernist literature is a fascinating area of study -- one which you could pursue on your own. What you need to remember is that the techniques of representation in the visual arts were undergoing a radical transformation, moving away from an attempt to recreate an anatomically accurate human form to a representation of the artist's personal vision. Another well-known modernist painting, where traditional perspective has been abandoned, is Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907). Do look it up on the internet. Influenced by modernism; architecture, music, and sculpture also experimented with form.



In the years between 1880-1930, the novel too witnessed a major period of experimentation and innovation, demolishing assumptions that a novel should be a transparent window on life and seeking new methods to depict reality. However, it is important to remember that the experiments in technique were rooted in history. As Daiches observes:

The heroic age of experiment and expansion in the English novel was thus the product of what might be called a crisis in civilization, not the result of a wilful desire to “make it new” and be original for the sake of being original. (6)

The major English novelists of this period discarded traditional methods of writing fiction, turning inward for their material. It is generally agreed that, amongst others, the ideas of the French philosopher Henri Bergson influenced novelists -- even those who had not read his work. The work of William James, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung drew attention to the existence of an inner consciousness and the realization that human personality was not all quantifiable and observable. Delving deep into the human psyche became a major concern for the modern novelist and a characteristic feature of modern fiction.

The early twentieth century was a period of experimentation for the modern English novel; a conscious revolt against traditional forms. Compared to the voluminous Victorian novel, the modern novel was of a much shorter length. The third person narrator as observer, presenting a single point of view, was replaced by a multiplicity of perspectives -- such as those presented by Joseph Conrad and James Joyce in their novels. Different strategies were adopted in the quest to depict a subjective reality. The modern novelist attempted to replicate the workings of the human mind through literary techniques like interior monologue, incorrect syntax, faulty grammar, and absence of punctuation. Chronology was dispensed with and there was, what we could call, a lateral exploration of the human mind in a given moment. In her own fiction, Virginia Woolf mastered the technique of ‘stream of consciousness’ -- a term coined by the psychologist William James in his book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), in which he likened human consciousness to a stream.

Paralleling the literary experiments of novelists such as Henry James, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, was a corresponding growth in novel criticism. It was Henry James who initiated a serious discussion on the novel as an art form. In “The Art of Fiction” (1884), he pleads for freedom from dead categories and a Victorian sentimentality. The novelists Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Ford Maddox Ford started to discuss the nature of their art. D. H. Lawrence, in “Morality and the Novel” (1925), spoke about the author’s struggle with the ‘imposed morals’ of society.



Another major book on the subject is E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). Apart from these novelists, non-fiction writers also wrote about the art of literature. Percy Lubbock, in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), discussed the formal qualities of the novel.

In various essays, including “Modern Fiction” (1919), Woolf also contributed to this conversation. In her pamphlet “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (1924), considered a literary manifesto of modernism, she writes of an anonymous woman travelling in a train carriage and the various methods that could be employed to depict her character in fiction. Woolf believes that modern fiction needs new forms to explore a fragmented reality.

1.5 CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This part of the study material will help you through a close reading of Virginia Woolf's essay, “Modern Fiction.” Names and terms that you may not be familiar with are explained in the Notes at the end, in the order in which they appear in the essay. Woolf writes in a conversational style, conveying her impressions about the modern novel. She does not present any formal critical principles, such as Aristotle does in the *Poetics*. Her writing is informal, liberally peppered with metaphors. As the title of her collection of essays implies, Woolf's work is aimed at the common reader, not the critic or scholar.

The essay begins with Woolf's assertion that if one were to survey English literature of the previous centuries, it becomes apparent that not much progress has been made in terms of technique. Viewed from above, English fiction displays a “circular tendency” (146). She feels that late eighteenth and early nineteenth century novelists like Henry Fielding and Jane Austen wrote admirable novels, but their fiction has “a strange air of simplicity,” working as they did with “simple tools and primitive materials” (146).

Woolf turns her attention to novelists living in the current time. Though she expresses her indebtedness to novelists of the late nineteenth-century: John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, and H. G. Wells, she thinks that their fiction is disappointing “because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body” (146). To better understand the quarrel that she had with these novelists, read the following two passages from Arnold Bennett's novel *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), which is about two sisters, Constance and Sophia Baines; daughters of a shopkeeper. It is acknowledged as a masterpiece of literary realism:

The Baines's shop, to make which three dwellings had at intervals been thrown into one, lay at the bottom of the Square. It formed about one-third of the south side of the Square, the remainder being made up of Critchlow's (chemist), the



clothier's, and the Hanover Spirit Vaults. ("Vaults" was a favourite synonym of the public-house in the Square. Only two of the public-houses were crude public-houses: the rest were "vaults.") It was a composite building of three storeys, in blackish-crimson brick, with a projecting shop-front and, above and behind that, two rows of little windows. On the sash of each window was a red cloth roll stuffed with sawdust, to prevent draughts; plain white blinds descended about six inches from the top of each window. There were no curtains to any of the windows save one; this was the window of the drawing-room, on the first floor at the corner of the Square and King Street. Another window, on the second storey, was peculiar, in that it had neither blind nor pad, and was very dirty; this was the window of an unused room that had a separate staircase to itself, the staircase being barred by a door always locked. Constance and Sophia had lived in continual expectation of the abnormal issuing from that mysterious room, which was next to their own. But they were disappointed. The room had no shameful secret except the incompetence of the architect who had made one house out of three; it was just an empty, unemployable room. The building had also a considerable frontage on King Street, where, behind the shop, was sheltered the parlour, with a large window and a door that led directly by two steps into the street. A strange peculiarity of the shop was that it bore no signboard. Once it had had a large signboard which a memorable gale had blown into the Square. Mr. Baines had decided not to replace it. (Bennett)

Pay attention to the manner in which Arnold Bennett describes the shop: right down to the colour of the blinds and the number of steps leading to the street. Here is another passage from the same novel. Read it carefully:

The two girls came up the unlighted stone staircase which led from Maggie's cave to the door of the parlour. Sophia, foremost, was carrying a large tray, and Constance a small one. Constance, who had nothing on her tray but a teapot, a bowl of steaming and balmy-scented mussels and cockles, and a plate of hot buttered toast, went directly into the parlour on the left. Sophia had in her arms the entire material and apparatus of a high tea for two, including eggs, jam, and toast (covered with the slop-basin turned upside down), but not including mussels and cockles. She turned to the right, passed along the corridor by the cutting-out room, up two steps into the sheeted and shuttered gloom of the closed shop, up the showroom stairs, through the showroom, and so into the bedroom corridor. Experience had proved it easier to make this long detour than to round the



difficult corner of the parlour stairs with a large loaded tray. Sophia knocked with the edge of the tray at the door of the principal bedroom. The muffled oratorical sound from within suddenly ceased, and the door was opened by a very tall, very thin, black-bearded man, who looked down at Sophia as if to demand what she meant by such an interruption.

“I’ve brought the tea, Mr. Critchlow,” said Sophia.

And Mr. Critchlow carefully accepted the tray.

“Is that my little Sophia?” asked a faint voice from the depths of the bedroom.

“Yes, father,” said Sophia. (Bennett)

Notice how each item on the tray is catalogued and each action recorded, in an attempt to create the illusion of reality. Though Virginia Woolf admires Bennett’s craftsmanship, she complains about this misplaced attention to detail, as it blots out “the light of conception” (149). These rather long extracts from Bennett’s novel are meant to draw your attention to his distinct narrative style.

Woolf dismisses the nineteenth-century novelists’ attempts to capture “life” and feels they are slaves to the necessity of constructing a novel with thirty-two chapters, and structuring it in accordance with conventional categories like tragedy, comedy or romance. It is not difficult to understand why Woolf calls these novelists “materialists” (147). According to her, H. G. Wells’ fiction is also unsatisfactory because of the “crudity and coarseness” of his characters (148). Wells’ novels are utopias with implicit criticism of British institutions and Woolf feels that, though his intentions are noble, the characters in his novels fail to touch the reader. The third novelist she mentions is John Galsworthy, whose sequence of novels, *The Forsyte Saga*, is considered a faithful representation of upper-class English life. Galsworthy was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923, “for his distinguished art of narration which takes its highest form in *The Forsyte Saga*” (Nobelprize.org). However, Woolf dismisses his work in one line. Read her assessment of these novelists:

If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one word, materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial appear the true and enduring. (148)

The word Woolf uses is “life,” to describe the quality missing in the nineteenth-century novel. She deplores the fact that novelists like Bennett invest an inordinate amount of labour



in creating an aura of plausibility for their characters: ensuring that they are “dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour” (149).

Woolf feels that modern novelists must discard old conventions and shift their attention to the subconscious. It is evident that she was influenced by the ideas of Henri Bergson, William James, and Sigmund Freud. In a passage that describes her belief, in a series of visual metaphors, she writes:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible. (150)

In her own fiction, Woolf succeeds in capturing the workings of the human mind, with immense fidelity. Brushing aside the need to present a sequence of discrete events in strict chronology, she explores and documents the nebulous territory of human psychology. Known as the ‘stream of consciousness,’ this was the technique modern novelists turned to, to explore the subconscious.

No description or summary could do justice to Woolf’s innovative technique. Now read this extract from her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*; where the central protagonist Clarissa Dalloway is out shopping in central London. Notice how, instead of details about Clarissa’s surroundings, the novelist presents her nagging thoughts about her daughter Elizabeth and her relationship with her history teacher, Miss Doris Kilman, a German:

Bond Street fascinated her; Bond Street early in the morning in the season; its flags flying; its shops; no splash; no glitter; one roll of tweed in the shop where her father had bought his suits for fifty years; a few pearls; salmon on an iceblock.

‘That is all,’ she said, looking at the fishmonger’s. ‘That is all,’ she repeated, pausing for a moment at the window of a glove shop where, before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves. And her old Uncle William used to say a lady is known by her shoes and her gloves. He had turned on his bed one morning in the middle of the War. He had said, ‘I have had enough.’ Gloves and shoes; she had a passion for gloves; but her own daughter, her Elizabeth, cared not a straw for either of them.



Not a straw, she thought, going on up Bond Street to a shop where they kept flowers for her when she gave a party. Elizabeth really cared for her dog most of all. The whole house this morning smelt of tar. Still, better poor Grizzle than Miss Kilman; better distemper and tar and all the rest of it than sitting mewed in a stuffy bedroom with a prayer book! Better anything, she was inclined to say. But it might be only a phase, as Richard said, such as all girls go through. It might be falling in love. But why with Miss Kilman? who had been badly treated of course; one must make allowances for that, and Richard said she was very able, had a really historical mind. Anyhow they were inseparable, and Elizabeth, her own daughter, went to Communion; and how she dressed, how she treated people who came to lunch she did not care a bit, it being her experience that the religious ecstasy made people callous (so did causes); dulled their feelings, for Miss Kilman would do anything for the Russians, starved herself for the Austrians, but in private inflicted positive torture, so insensitive was she, dressed in a green mackintosh coat. Year in year out she wore that coat; she perspired; she was never in the room five minutes without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she was; how rich you were; how she lived in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be, all her soul rusted with that grievance sticking in it, her dismissal from school during the War—poor embittered unfortunate creature! For it was not her one hated but the idea of her, which undoubtedly had gathered in to itself a great deal that was not Miss Kilman; had become one of those spectres with which one battles in the night; one of those spectres who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants; for no doubt with another throw of the dice, had the black been uppermost and not the white, she would have loved Miss Kilman! But not in this world. No. (11-12)

Mark how Woolf imagines the inner world of Mrs Dalloway: succeeding in her attempt “to record the atoms as they fall upon the mind” (150). Observe how the sight of a pair of gloves in a shop-window reminds her of her Uncle William. She captures Mrs Dalloway’s anxiety about the possibility of a romantic alliance between her daughter and Doris Kilman. Random thoughts are woven together and there are hardly any details about Clarissa Dalloway’s surroundings: in sharp contrast to Arnold Bennett’s narrative style

Woolf expresses her admiration for the younger English novelists for attempting to capture life in their novels, and “to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly



observed by the novelist” (150). She singles out James Joyce for special mention: applauding his sincerity as a novelist in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and *Ulysses*, which was serialized in the American journal *The Little Review*, (March 1918 - December 1920), before being published as a novel in Paris, in 1922. Woolf calls Joyce “spiritual” for the simple reason that he fearlessly attempts to capture an elusive subjective reality (151). Notice how a contrast is set up between the major Victorian novelists and the moderns.

In her diaries, Woolf confesses that she did not enjoy reading *Ulysses*, but she calls the cemetery scene, from the Hades episode in the novel, a “masterpiece,” as it is a superb illustration of what the subject matter of fiction should be (151). In this scene, Leopold Bloom, the central protagonist, is accompanying the funeral cortège of his friend Paddy Dignam, who is to be buried at Glasnevin cemetery. As the horse-drawn carriage moves through Dublin, and even at the cemetery, Bloom’s thoughts move from his son Rudy, who died at eleven days old, to thoughts of his wife Molly’s infidelity. At the cemetery, while Dignam is being lowered into the grave, Bloom thinks:

Poor Dignam! His last lie on the earth in his box. When you think of them all it does seem a waste of wood. All gnawed through. They could invent a handsome bier with a kind of panel sliding let it down that way. Ay but they might object to be buried out of another fellow’s. They’re so particular. Lay me in my native earth. Bit of clay from the holy land. Only a mother and deadborn child ever buried in the one coffin. I see what it means. I see. To protect him as long as possible even in the earth. The Irishman’s house is his coffin. Embalming in catacombs, mummies, the same idea.

Mr Bloom stood far back, his hat in his hand, counting the bared heads. Twelve. I’m thirteen. No. The chap in the macintosh is thirteen. Death’s number. Where the deuce did he pop out of? He wasn’t in the chapel, that I’ll swear. Silly superstition that about thirteen.

Nice soft tweed Ned Lambert has in that suit. Tinge of purple. I had one like that when we lived in Lombard street west. Dressy fellow he was once. Used to change three suits in the day. Must get that grey suit of mine turned by Mesias. Hello. It’s dyed. His wife I forgot he’s not married or his landlady ought to have picked out those threads for him. (Joyce, 105-6)

Bloom’s mind dwells on trivial pursuits in a sombre moment: counting the number of mourners and admiring the fabric of a friend’s suit. Joyce’s technique is non-linear, approximating human thought in all its complexity. Woolf commends Joyce for his vision:



“If we want life itself, here surely we have it” (151). She admits that our notions of method might make us rate *Ulysses* as inferior to other, conventional novels, such as Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). In another essay of hers, Woolf defends experiments in modern fiction, admitting that there will be difficulties along the way: “We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition” (“Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” 22). What the reader needs is an openness of mind to appreciate Joyce’s fiction. Any method is correct, as long as it conveys the novelist’s vision.

Woolf believes that, for the modern novelists, the problem is how to find subjects, other than conventional ones, around which to construct their fiction. She says it is, in all probability, in “the dark places of psychology” (152). Remember that, around the time this essay was written, **psychology was emerging as a major discipline; drawing attention to the existence of the subconscious.** Sigmund Freud viewed art as the expression of repressed emotions and gave many terms to literary critics -- such as id, ego, and Oedipus Complex. Carl Jung’s concepts of psychoanalysis also influenced modern novelists. Woolf is convinced that once a novelist chooses to tread a different path, as far as subject matter is concerned, there is a need to look for a “different outline of form” (152).

To illustrate her point, Woolf talks at length about “Gusev” (1890), a short story by the Russian writer, Anton Chekhov. Though lacking in a discernible plot, it communicates eternal truths about existence, mortality, and nature. As Woolf mentions, the short story revolves around the occupants of a cabin in a ship and their conversations. All of them are seriously ill and sailing home from the Far East. Gusev is a peasant soldier, returning home to his family in Russia. During his illness, visions of his village, family, and sleigh-rides in the snow flash through his mind. Eventually Gusev dies and his body is thrown overboard. Read the last page of “Gusev” to appreciate Chekhov’s art:

The man on watch duty tilted up the end of the plank, Gusev slid off and flew head foremost, turned a somersault in the air and splashed into the sea. He was covered with foam and for a moment looked as though he were wrapped in lace, but the minute passed and he disappeared in the waves.

He went rapidly towards the bottom. Did he reach it? It was said to be three miles to the bottom. After sinking sixty or seventy feet, he began moving more and more slowly, swaying rhythmically, as though he were hesitating and, carried along by the current, moved more rapidly sideways than downwards.



Then he was met by a shoal of the fish called harbour pilots. Seeing the dark body the fish stopped as though petrified, and suddenly turned round and disappeared. In less than a minute they flew back swift as an arrow to Gusev, and began zig-zagging round him in the water.

After that another dark body appeared. It was a shark. It swam under Gusev with dignity and no show of interest, as though it did not notice him, and sank down upon its back, then it turned belly upwards, basking in the warm, transparent water and languidly opened its jaws with two rows of teeth. The harbour pilots are delighted, they stop to see what will come next. After playing a little with the body the shark nonchalantly puts its jaws under it, cautiously touches it with its teeth, and the sailcloth is rent its full length from head to foot; one of the weights falls out and frightens the harbour pilots, and striking the shark on the ribs goes rapidly to the bottom.

Overhead at this time the clouds are massed together on the side where the sun is setting; one cloud like a triumphal arch, another like a lion, a third like a pair of scissors. . . . From behind the clouds a broad, green shaft of light pierces through and stretches to the middle of the sky; a little later another, violet-coloured, lies beside it; next that, one of gold, then one rose-coloured. . . . The sky turns a soft lilac. Looking at this gorgeous, enchanted sky, at first the ocean scowls, but soon it, too, takes tender, joyous, passionate colours for which it is hard to find a name in human speech. (Chekhov)

“Gusev” has a haunting quality and a philosophical dimension to it. Though there is no conventional plot in this short story and Woolf admits that it is “vague and inconclusive,” it manages to convey Chekhov’s vision of the transcendental nature of death (153).

In the next paragraph, she goes on to express her immense admiration for Russian fiction, in comparison to which, English novels appear shallow:

In every great Russian writer we seem to discern the features of a saint, if sympathy for the sufferings of others, love towards them, endeavour to reach some goal worthy of the most exacting demands of the spirit constitute saintliness. (153)

Woolf quotes from a relatively lesser-known short story, “The Village Priest” by Elena Militsina: “Learn to make yourself akin to people . . . with love towards them” to draw attention to the deep compassion that characterizes much of Russian fiction (153). Though



Russian novelists raise existential questions, there is a lingering sense of sadness in their fiction. She points out that the English, being the products of a more ancient civilization, are prone to “enjoy and fight” rather than “suffer and understand,” and English fiction shows a propensity for humour and comedy (154). According to Woolf, these two diverse categories of fiction underline the immense possibilities of literature.

In what is an apparent plea to novelists to break the mould of traditional fiction, Woolf concludes the essay by asserting that anything can become the subject matter of fiction: “everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (154).

1.6 SUMMING UP

In her essay, “Modern Fiction,” Virginia Woolf has attempted to provide an overview of the modern English novel. It is neither a comprehensive survey nor a systematic account of any theory. Woolf begins by expressing her admiration for Jane Austen and Henry Fielding, and then moves on to a dismissal of the craft of Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy. She calls them “materialists” because of their focus on the outward minutiae of life. Arnold Bennett is singled out for her special disapproval. Woolf admires his craft but thinks that his fiction lacks vision. Among the nineteenth-century novelists, she exempts Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad from her criticism. Although Woolf doesn’t mention what exactly she admires in their fiction, in other essays of hers she appreciates their inward gaze.

Woolf dismisses the type of ‘materialist’ novel written by Arnold Bennett; one which abounds in outward detail but fails to capture “life.” One could assume that, as a reader, she wanted more of an honest exploration of the thoughts of the characters. She singles out James Joyce as an example of an artist who has the courage to go against convention, to create something new. Though she is not happy with the obscenity in his fiction, she admires his technique. Special mention is made of the cemetery scene in *Ulysses*, as an example of a novelist successfully approximating human thought in words. It is for this reason that she calls Joyce a “spiritualist,” and as the name suggests, one who can look into the soul of a man.

Woolf’s essay is an appeal for newer forms in fiction. She doesn’t prescribe any particular method for modern writers but believes that any method is appropriate; as long as it communicates the novelist’s vision. Not only in the form of the novel but in its subject matter too, the novelist should not feel constrained: “everything is the proper stuff of fiction” (154). Whereas the conventional Victorian novel remained concerned with class, status, and



marriage, the modern novel should explore other areas. Woolf points in the direction of psychology but ends by asserting the novelists' right to choose whatever interests them.

Check Your Progress

- i) Why is Woolf critical of novelists like Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H. G. Wells?
- ii) What is it about James Joyce that Woolf admires?
- iii) Explain what Woolf means by the terms 'materialists' and 'spiritualists.'
- iv) Write a brief note on Russian literature, as described in the essay.
- v) Why does Virginia Woolf praise Anton Chekhov's "Gusev"?
- vi) What, according to Woolf, is "the proper stuff of fiction"?

NOTES

Fielding: Henry Fielding (1707-1754) was an English novelist, most well-known for *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749). He, along with the novelist Samuel Richardson, is known as the "father of the English novel." He wrote in a realistic style that dominated English fiction till the late nineteenth-century.

Jane Austen: Jane Austen (1775-1817) was an English novelist who based her novels on the lives of ordinary people. *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and *Emma* (1815) are some of her most popular novels; still read for their convincing characterizations.

Mr Wells: H. G. Wells (1886-1946) was a famous English novelist and author of influential science fiction novels: *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds* (1897).

Mr Bennett: Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) was an English author, who wrote thirty novels in all: some of his most popular ones being *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902), *The Old Wives' Tale* (1905), and *Clayhanger* (1910). Bennett's fiction depicts life in rural England in great detail.

Mr Galsworthy: John Galsworthy (1867-1933) was an English novelist and playwright, most well-known for his sequence of novels, known as *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-21), that follow the lives of three generations of an upper-middle class family. Galsworthy won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1932.



Mr Hardy: Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), English poet and novelist, who wrote *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). Virginia Woolf had read most of Hardy's fiction and admired his work.

Mr. Conrad: Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), Polish novelist, who wrote in English. He is best remembered for his novels, *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900). In August 1924, Woolf published an essay in *The Times Literary Supplement*, "Conrad" in which she paid tribute to the novelist and his achievement in exploring the dark recesses of the human mind.

Mr Hudson: William Henry Hudson (1841-1922) was a British naturalist and novelist. He wrote novels set in Argentina, where he was born and brought up. The most famous of his works are *Green Mansions* (1904), *The Purple Land* (1885), and *Far Away and Long Ago* (1918).

the creator of *The Old Wives' Tale*, George Cannon, Edwin Clayhanger: A reference to characters from Arnold Bennett's trilogy, published together as *The Clayhanger Family* (1910-18).

the Five Towns: Fictional town, where most of Arnold Bennett's novels are set.

his Joans and his Peters: A reference to H. G. Wells' novel, *Joan and Peter* (1918), which is a critique of the English educational system.

Mr. James Joyce: James Joyce (1882-1941) was an Irish novelist, whose *Ulysses* (1922) is a modern counterpart of the *Odyssey*. The massive novel deals with the events of a single day. *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) and a collection of short stories *The Dubliners* (1914) are some of his other, most famous works. Joyce's style of writing was a major influence on literary modernism.

Youth: Novel by Joseph Conrad, first published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1898.

***The Mayor of Casterbridge*:** Novel by Thomas Hardy, a novelist whom Virginia Woolf admired.

***Tristram Shandy*:** Full title - *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767), is a novel by Laurence Sterne, published in nine volumes. It is considered a forerunner of the modern psychological novel because of its unconventional structure, non-linear narration, and colloquial language.



Pendennis: Full title - *The History of Pendennis: His Fortunes and Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest Enemy* (1849-50). It is a semi-autobiographical novel by William Makepeace Thackeray, author of *Vanity Fair* (1848).

Chekov: Anton Chekov (1860-1904), was a Russian playwright and short story writer, who is considered one of the greatest writers of all time.

'Gusev': A short story by Anton Chekhov, published in 1890. It is considered a classic modern short story.

Sterne: Laurence Sterne (1713-1768), was an Irish novelist, most well-known for *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) and *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768).

Meredith: George Meredith (1828-1909) was an English novelist, who wrote *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) and *The Egoist* (1879), noted for its attention to human psychology.

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**T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919)****Dr. Seema Suri****2.1 INTRODUCTION**

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was an American-English poet, playwright, literary critic, and editor; and a prominent figure of the modernist movement in literature. Eliot’s work as a poet and literary critic impacted the way poetry is read, even today. His essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” was first published, anonymously, in *The Egoist* in 1919 and, a year later, in a collection of essays, *The Sacred Wood* (1920). Read it carefully before going through this part of the study material.

This unit includes a brief biography of Eliot, a detailed summary, and critical commentary on the essay. Its main objectives are to;

- familiarize you with T. S. Eliot’s contribution to modernist poetry;
- explain his concept of tradition in poetry;
- outline his ‘Impersonal Theory of Poetry’; and
- place his work in a historical perspective.

2.2 T. S. ELIOT: A BRIEF SKETCH

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in 1888 in St. Louis, Mississippi, and he was the youngest of six siblings. His father was a wealthy industrialist and his mother, a schoolteacher. Eliot studied at Harvard, obtained his masters in comparative literature in 1909, and worked there for a while, as a philosophy assistant. After spending a year in Paris, he moved to Oxford, England, in 1911, on a scholarship and started work on his doctoral thesis on the philosopher F. H. Bradley. Eliot was one of the most learned poets of his generation; familiar with classical Greek, Sanskrit, advanced mathematics, Indian philosophy, and Japanese Buddhism. Feeling suffocated by the academic environment at Oxford, he shifted to London. There, he formed a close friendship with Ezra Pound, the leading poet of the modernist movement. Impressed by Eliot, Pound helped him get his first poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. With the publication of his collection of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917, Eliot cemented his position as one of the leading voices of modern poetry. *The Wasteland* published in 1922, is considered one of the most representative works of modernism. *The Hollow Men* (1925) and



Four Quartets (1936-1942) are some of his other works. In addition, he wrote many plays: *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), and *The Elder Statesman* (1958).

In 1915, Eliot met and married Vivienne Haigh-Wood, a governess from Cambridge. By all accounts, it was an unhappy marriage and they lived in a state of constant friction. He and his wife separated in 1933 and, a few years later, she was committed to a mental institution, where she died in 1947. He was baptized into the Church of England in 1927 and took British citizenship in 1928. In the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (1928), Eliot announced that he was a “classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion” (vii).

Between 1916-1921, Eliot contributed around a hundred reviews and articles to different periodicals; such as *The Egoist*, *New Statesman*, and the *Times literary Supplement*. As his earnings from this work were not good, he took up a job as a school teacher, and then as a clerk at Lloyd’s Bank. In 1922, he founded the *Criterion*, a literary journal, which he edited for seventeen years. Eliot was as renowned a literary critic as he was as a poet. He was an editor and director in the publishing house Faber and Faber, from 1925 to 1965. Some of his major works of criticism include: *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1949), and *On Poetry and Poets* (1957). T. S. Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

2.3 MODERNIST POETRY

In the previous section on Virginia Woolf’s essay “Modern Fiction,” you have read briefly about modernism, its historical background, and impact on ideas about art. Modernism is not a term that describes a conscious artistic movement with a clear manifesto. It was used by critics to define experiments in literature in the beginning of the twentieth century. As discussed earlier, the world was changing; new ideas in philosophy, psychology, political theory, anthropology, and even science, were challenging traditional beliefs. Art in every form was impacted by these, leading to an aesthetic revolution in the Western world.

Along with the novel, poetry too witnessed a period of experimentation. Most of the modernist poets were American: Wallace Stevens, E. E. Cummings, Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, and Marianne Moore. However, England too had its own avant-garde movement. Along with the poet Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot brought about a revolution in modern poetry. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1922); and Ezra Pound’s *Riposte* (1912), *Des Imagistes* (1914), and *The Cantos* (1917-70) are considered some of the most representative works of modernism.



Wyndham Lewis, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and W. B. Yeats are some of the other, most influential writers of this period.

A quick overview of modernist poetry reveals a few common characteristics. The poems use blank verse, colloquial language, disjointed phrases, and imagery drawn from common, everyday life. Responding to the loss of a sense of community in their world, the poets focus on feelings of alienation, loneliness, and hopelessness. Read these lines from Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," where a middle-aged man's dramatic monologue mirrors the dejection and anxiety of modern urban existence:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit. (1- 12)

Don't miss the startling image of a "patient etherized upon a table." Eliot's poetry incorporates within itself, the major motifs of modernist poetry.

Let us take a look at another poem: "In a Station of the Metro" (1911), by Ezra Pound. It is a study in experimental technique. For Pound, poetry was primarily about the evocation of a mood, through images. In just two lines and a total of fourteen words, he uses an image to convey the presence of ghost-like passengers in the Paris Metro:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Observe how fragmented language is used to depict fragmented experience. These are just a couple of fleeting examples of modernist poetry, in which both T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound critique western civilization, industrialization, and bourgeois individualism.



It was not only as a poet that Eliot contributed to the evolution of a modernist aesthetic: his was one of the most authoritative voices of modernism. He produced an impressive corpus of literary criticism in his lifetime. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot sets forth his ideas on the place of tradition in poetry and his impersonal theory of poetry.

2.4 DETAILED SUMMARY OF “TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT”

The essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” first appeared in the September and December 1919 issues of *The Egoist*, for which T. S. Eliot was the assistant editor. The magazine had only four hundred or so subscribers at the time the essay was first published, but it went on to become one of the most influential essays of the early twentieth century. A year later, it was published in Eliot’s collection of essays, *The Sacred Wood*. Since then, it has been published in almost every reputed anthology of literary criticism.

Eliot begins by deploring the absence of a distinct tradition in English criticism and credits the French for having produced a sizeable body of criticism. He believes that the reader should pay attention to what is passing through his/ her mind when reading a book. Eliot points out how, in the process of evaluating a writer’s work, we tend to seek that which differentiates him from other writers: “the peculiar essence of the man” (43). If we discard this approach, we will discover that “not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (43). Having established that a poet should be evaluated by the extent to which he belongs to a literary tradition, Eliot clarifies that tradition is not something inherited by the poet, but a “historical sense” that,

compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. (44)

Note how Eliot borrows heavily from archaeological metaphors to visualize his sense of tradition, which is like a structure with an underlying order. The poet must realize that the “mind of Europe,” the tradition of which he is a part, can be traced back from Shakespeare to Homer, to the cave art of the Upper Paleolithic period (46). He suggests that the poet should



be familiar with the great literary works of Europe. However, being conscious of a tradition does not mean that the poet should mimic those poets who achieved greatness before him.

Eliot understands the pressure this will put on the poet; having to read a very large number of works to develop “the consciousness of the past,” and a sense of an underlying “ideal order” (47). He clarifies that it is not bookish knowledge that he is talking about. He also realizes that such demands on the poet could retard the poetic sensibility. He affirms that it is the duty of the poet to develop this familiarity with the past, throughout his career, in an aesthetic sense.

Eliot believed that poetry is “a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written” and firmly places the poet within a tradition; in this case, a European tradition (48). He clarifies that the relationship between the past and present is not unidirectional, with each poet simply adding to the existing body of poetry. The past is also slightly altered by each poet’s work; readjustments are made. However, Eliot doesn’t explicate on the practical aspects of his concept of tradition; insisting, instead, that the poet cultivate a ‘historical sense.’

Having explained what he means by tradition, Eliot goes on to elaborate the relation of the poet to his poetry. Taking up a position diametrically opposite that of the Romantics, Eliot outlines the effect of acquiring a historical sense on the poet:

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. (47)

Without explicitly saying so, he demolishes the basic tenets of the Romantic movement: the belief that poetry is an expression of emotions, and the poet a person with the gift of imagination. He evokes an analogy from the chemistry lab to explain the process of depersonalization; comparing it to the outcome of introducing finely filiated platinum into a chamber filled with oxygen and sulphur dioxide. Sulphurous acid is formed as a result of the chemical reaction, but the platinum, which is the catalyst, remains unchanged. It is worth mentioning here that Eliot’s analogy is scientifically inaccurate: the compound that is formed as a result of the combination of sulphur dioxide and oxygen is sulphur trioxide. However, it makes no difference to his thesis that the mind of a poet is the catalyst, the “finely perfected medium,” that transforms raw emotions into feelings (48).

Eliot begins the second section of his essay by asserting that the critic should focus on the poetry, not the poet. It follows that the poet does not have a personality to express in his



poetry. He goes on to define what he calls his “Impersonal theory of poetry” (47). Reminding the reader about his conception of poetry, as discussed in the previous section, he continues with the scientific analogy of the platinum which works as a catalyst. The two gases, oxygen and sulphur dioxide, that combine to form sulphureous acid, represent emotions and feelings, and the poet’s mind is the platinum that remains unchanged after this chemical reaction:

The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. . . . the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. (48)

You must have noticed that, throughout the essay, Eliot uses the words “emotions” and “feelings” as components of the creative process. It may cause some difficulty while attempting to understand the central theme of the essay because, as a rule, these words are considered synonyms and used interchangeably. However, a careful reading suggests that “emotions” refer to the artist’s personal emotions, whereas “feelings” are those evoked in the reader’s mind. As C. K. Stead observes, emotions are “aesthetically transformed into feelings” in poetry (156). This interpretation is in keeping with Eliot’s critical formulations:

What every poet starts from is his own emotions. . . . Shakespeare too was occupied with the struggle - which alone constitutes life for a poet - to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and personal. (*Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca* 18)

The main point that Eliot is trying to make is that the artistic process involves a metamorphosis of the artist’s personal emotions into universal feelings. This is accomplished through the objectification of emotions through images. He believes that the poet’s mind is a repository of “numberless feelings, phrases, images,” which are used in his poetry, at suitable places (49). What should be of interest to the critic is the aesthetic process: “For it is not the ‘greatness,’ the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure under which the fusion takes place, that counts” (49). In the subsequent sections of his essay, Eliot gives instances from medieval and classical European literature to demonstrate the various permutations and combinations of emotions and feelings in poetry.

Eliot mentions the last quatrain of Canto XV of Dante’s *Inferno* as an example of a poet creating great literature; without using any personal emotions. In Hades, Dante meets the soul of Ser Brunetto Latini, an Italian scholar, who was his mentor. Though condemned to hell for sodomy, he is addressed with great respect by Dante:



Then he turned round, and seemed to be of those
Who at Verona run for the Green Mantle
Across the plain; and seemed to be among them
The one who wins, and not the one who loses. (Canto XV, 120-24)

The poet compares his mentor and teacher to the man who wins a green mantle, the prize at the foot races in Verona. Eliot moves on to refer to another episode from the *Divine Comedy*. In Canto V, Paolo and Francesca are two lovers, condemned to hell for the sin of adultery. [Check Notes] Yet, Francesca’s account of their love touches Dante;

“Love, that exempts no one beloved from loving,
Seized me with pleasure of this man so strongly,
That, as thou seest, it doth not yet desert me;
Love has conducted us unto one death;
Caina waiteth him who quenched our life!” (Canto V, 99-103)

Dante’s inclusion of the tale of the real-life lovers in his epic was meant to serve as a cautionary tale of the consequences of adultery, but later generations were swayed by the poetry of this episode. The love of Paolo and Francesca has been iconized by artists over the centuries. This is perhaps what Eliot means when he speaks of the “intensity of their love” transcending the purportedly moral tone of the epic poem (50). The beautiful poetry resonates with readers because of the universality of the feelings expressed.

Eliot goes on to discuss yet another episode from the *Inferno*, in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, where Dante and Virgil meet those who sinned by giving evil counsel. In Canto XXVI, they come across Ulysses and Diomedes, who are in Hell for the siege of the Trojan horse, persuading Achilles to leave the weeping Deidamia, and stealing a statue of Pallas Athena. Ulysses’ account of his own death is what Eliot refers to [Check Notes].

To further illustrate the possible variety of combinations of emotions and feelings in poetry, Eliot refers to examples from classical literature. He mentions Aeschylus’ tragic play *Agamemnon*, and Shakespeare’s *Othello* -- both of which differ in the emotions that constitute the aesthetic experience. In another illustration of the separation of art from emotion, he mentions Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” one of the most well-known poems of the Romantic period. Eliot points out that this poem includes numerous feelings that have nothing to do with the nightingale, but contribute to the feelings evoked in the reader’s mind;



such as the impermanence of human joy, mortality, and suffering. Read these lines from the ode:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. (21-30)

Coming back to his “Impersonal Theory of Poetry,” Eliot reiterates his belief that the poet does not have a personality to express. He claims that the artist is a medium, in whom “impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways,” and that great art is “composed out of feelings solely” (50).

Eliot proceeds to give another example of the manner in which art includes emotions that are not directly related to the events in the poetry. He quotes a passage from a relatively little-known Jacobean play by Thomas Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607). As the title implies, the plot revolves around the revenge of Vindice, for the death of his fiancée, at the hands of a Duke. He has been plotting revenge for nine years and, in the passage quoted by Eliot, he is addressing her skull, which he carries around with him. As Eliot comments, the overriding feeling in these lines doesn't have much to do with the dramatic action, bordering as it is on the philosophical. Read these lines carefully:

And now methinks I could e'en chide myself
For doating on her beauty, though her death
Shall be revenged after no common action.
Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours
For thee? For thee does she undo herself?
Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
For the poor benefit of a bewildering minute?



Why does yon fellow falsify highways,
And put his life between the judge's lips,
To refine such a thing - keeps horse and men
To beat their valours for her? . . . (Act III, Scene V, 72-85)

In this passage, Middleton starts with Vindice's love for his beloved's skull, but shifts to an expression of disgust with women in general. Vindice wonders why "lordships" or baronial estates are sold off and thieves risk their lives to maintain women in luxury [Check Notes for a detailed explanation]. The point Eliot seems to be making, in the context of this passage, is that Middleton steps aside to make observations on womankind in general; expressing feelings that go beyond the immediate context of the drama. As Eliot reiterates: "The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all" (52).

Eliot rejects Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity," and dismisses it as an "inexact formula" (52):

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. (52-53)

He believes that Romantic poetry suffers from an excess of emotion, and counters the Romantic position by asserting that poetry is a "conscious and deliberate" act, created from a position of intellectual detachment (52).

The third and last part of the essay begins with an epigraph in Greek, from Aristotle's *De Anima* (350 BCE): "*ho de nous isôs theioteson ti kai apathes estin.*" Translated, it reads: "While the intellect is doubtless a thing more divine and unaffected." It is one of the most contested sentences in Aristotle's work and Eliot must have been familiar with its history of interpretation. Broadly speaking, Aristotle is asserting the supremacy of the thinking mind, which is not separate from the body. The significance of this cannot be missed, placed as it is, immediately after Eliot's rejection of the Romantic position on poetic creation: "The emotion of art is impersonal" (52).

2.5 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot examines the relationship of the poet to the past, and the poet to the poem. Eliot's concept of tradition, "the mind of Europe," presumes a continuum over the ages and lays itself open to charges of Eurocentrism (46). His 'tradition'



is based on assumptions of a homogenous European culture, with an underlying ideal order and no space for dissent or alternate cultures, and his insistence on adherence to a tradition places constraints on the poet. Eliot sometimes tends to ramble in his writing, making it difficult to grasp some of his pronouncements. Are we to assume that good poetry is that which is full of allusions to classics from the previous ages, very much like *The Wasteland* is? Eliot's own poem is replete with literary and cultural allusions that all readers may not be familiar with. Maybe, this prompted him to include footnotes to his poem; not that it diminishes the power of the poetry. In a, by now, well-known attack on his position on tradition, the poet Philip Larkin has caustically remarked:

As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understappers letting you see they know the right people.
(79)

Eliot's views hinder our appreciation of poetry that is intensely personal, like that of Sylvia Plath or Adrienne Rich.

Eliot's "Impersonal Theory of Poetry" is a rejection of Romantic subjectivism. What he is trying to do is to detach personal suffering from the process of artistic creation. The Romantic poets equated poetry with self-expression. P. B. Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry* (1821), stated that the poet is essentially a medium who connects the spiritual and human realms and saw imagination as the supreme poetic quality. William Blake famously observed: "one Power alone makes a Poet: Imagination, the Divine Vision" (665). However, in a departure from other Romantic poets, John Keats admires the "chameleon Poet," because he does not have an identity of his own and takes delight in all of his creations (387).

Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry should not be accepted uncritically. It diminishes the contribution of a whole body of poetry. In other essays, he calls Wordsworth boring, Shelley's ideas immature, and Byron commonplace. He rejects Romanticism in favour of Classicism, writing that the difference between the two is "the difference between the complete and the fragmentary, the adult and the immature, the orderly and the chaotic" ("The Function of Criticism" 26).

Many critics believe that Eliot was, perhaps, anxious to distance himself from speculations that his personal agonies were the source of his inspiration for *The Wasteland* (1922). It is important to remember that Eliot is urging critics to keep the poet's personal suffering out of any assessment of poetic worth. What, in effect, Eliot is arguing for is a



strategy that insists on “close reading” -- to evaluate the poetry without reference to the poet’s personal life.

The pedagogical strategy of close reading that Eliot advocates, forms the basis for what has come to be known as New Criticism: “Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry” (47). Poetry is not history, autobiography, or psychology and it should be viewed as an autonomous entity. This approach involves; first, an analysis of the parts of the poem and, secondly, an evaluation of the whole. It constitutes the template for the teaching of English poetry across most universities. Eliot’s observations influenced New Criticism, and the work of critics like F. R. Leavis, R. P. Warren, Allen Tate, and Stephen Spender. You will be reading more about this in the next unit.

Check Your Progress

- i) Summarize Eliot’s definition of ‘tradition.’
- ii) Which Cantos from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* are mentioned by Eliot, as examples of great poetry?
- iii) Why does Eliot disagree with the Romantic notion of poetry as a spontaneous expression of emotion?
- iv) Comment on the chemistry lab analogy used by Eliot to describe the process of artistic creation.
- v) Elaborate on Eliot’s “Impersonal theory of poetry.”

NOTES

Shakespeare: William Shakespeare (1564-1616), considered to be one of the greatest dramatists of all time.

Homer: Homer, who lived around 750 BCE; author of the greatest of epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. They are considered the most important poems of classical European literature.

rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen: A reference to the cave drawings of the Upper Paleolithic period in Europe, around 17,000-11,000 years ago. The drawings are realistic representations of humans and animals.



Plutarch: Greek philosopher, historian, and biographer. Plutarch (46-126 CE) is most well-known for his *Parallel Lives* or *Lives*, a collection of the biographies of famous Greek and Roman soldiers and statesmen. The English translation of his work, that appeared in 1579, is supposed to have been the source of Shakespeare's history plays.

Canto XV of the *Inferno*: Born in Italy, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) was one of the greatest European poets. Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1308-21) is considered one of the greatest works of medieval literature. The long narrative poem has three sections: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Guided by Virgil, Dante travels through hell and purgatory, finally led to a beatific vision of God in the end. In Canto XV, Dante (1265-1321) meets the soul of Ser Brunetto Latini (1220-1294), his mentor, who has been condemned to Hell for the sin of sodomy but Dante is overjoyed to see him.

the episode of Paolo and Francesca: In Canto V of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante meets the souls of Paolo and Francesca, who have been condemned to hell for the sin of adultery. Francesca da Polenta was married to Giovanni Malatesta but had an adulterous relationship with his younger brother, Paolo. Both Francesca and Paolo were killed by Giovanni when he found out. Though Dante was the first to include this tragic story of real-life lovers in his epic poem, it has been immortalized in numerous works of art over the centuries -- such as in a painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and symphony by Tchaikovsky. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became popular as a tale of rebellious love and less of a moral tale about the dangers of lust.

Canto XXVI, the voyage of Ulysses: Another reference to the *Inferno*. In this episode, Dante and Virgil meet the souls of Ulysses and Diomedes in Hell, who are there for the sin of evil counsel. Both sinned by using deceit to lay siege to Troy, through the Trojan horse, and stole Pallas Athena's statue. In this episode, Ulysses narrates an account of his death: how he persuaded a few of his men to accompany him on a ship, seeking adventure. However, they all perished at sea. According to Greek myth, Ulysses did not die in this manner but Dante presents Ulysses, not as an epic hero, but as a sinner being now punished in hell.

Agamemnon: Play by classical Greek playwright Aeschylus (524-455 BCE). First performed at the City Dionysia around 458 BCE, the tragedy is about Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War. He is killed by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. The play ends with both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus ruling over Thebes. Aeschylus' play has an emotional intensity and dramatic tension, unmatched by any other Greek tragedy.



Othello: One of William Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, written around 1603. It is about Othello, a Black military general who kills his much younger, white Venetian wife, whom he wrongly suspects of infidelity.

The ode of Keats: A reference to Keats' famous poem, "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), one of the most famous poems of the Romantic period.

the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: A reference to Aristotle's metaphysics, based on a belief in the essential unity of form and matter. For Aristotle, the soul is not an interior, immaterial entity lodged in a body.

a passage which is unfamiliar enough: Eliot quotes from the famous Jacobean play, *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), by Thomas Middleton (1580-1627). The play is about Vindice's revenge for the death of his beloved Gloriana, who was killed for resisting the sexual advances of a Duke. He carries her skull around as a reminder of his quest. In the passage quoted by Eliot, Vindice wonders why the silkworm expends itself to produce silk for a creature that will eventually end up as a skull. He also wonders why men sell off their inherited estates to dress their mistresses in finery. Then there are men who will "falsify highways" or put up misleading signposts so that travellers wander into isolated spots, making it easier for these highwaymen to rob them. They don't mind putting themselves at risk for the death penalty; all for their lady loves. Vindice wonders at the ignorance of men who would do all this for a moment's sexual pleasure. Eliot thinks that the feelings expressed by Vindice are not rooted in the dramatic action but comprise great poetry.

"emotion recollected in tranquillity": The famous phrase is from the poet William Wordsworth's Preface to the second edition of his *Lyrical Ballads* (1800); generally considered a manifesto of the Romantic movement in poetry.

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Principles of Literary Criticism

(Chapter I. The Chaos of Critical Theories)

(Chapter II. The Phantom Aesthetic State)

I. A. Richards

P. K. Satapathy

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism is simply the study of literary texts, including cultural texts like films, theatre, etc., to unravel their meaning, and assign them a value. In this very simplistic and limited sense, all of us practice literary criticism, in a non-self-conscious way, every day. Whenever we read a story, a poem, or see a film we interpret and evaluate it and, often, pass on our impressions to our friends. If we like what we read or see, we recommend it to our friends. In fact, this kind of literary criticism is, perhaps, as old as literature itself. However, literary criticism of a formal kind, where we not only try to understand and enjoy the literary text but also try to find the formal features of the text under study, dates to Aristotle's *Poetics* in the west and Bharata's *Natya Shastra* nearer home. In the western tradition, Plato started it all by banishing the poets from his Republic. His reasons for doing so were that poets were all about inspiration and very little about reason and rational thought and, hence, were untrustworthy. The poetic form, on the other hand, was nothing but an imperfect imitation of an already imperfect imitation of transcendent ideas and, hence, thrice removed from reality. So, in effect, Plato did not see much use for either poets or poetry in an ideal society. Aristotle drastically modified Plato's position and held that both poetry and poets had an important role to play in a society. In his *Poetics*, a comprehensive study of the art of tragedy, Aristotle concluded that though poetry/tragedy is an imitation, it is nevertheless necessary. It is necessary because it produces *Katharsis*, or in other words it purges the negative emotions of pity and terror in the audience and makes society harmonious. Literary criticism, since then, has engaged with these questions about the nature of literary forms and their inherent social values, in varying degrees and with varying emphasis.

In this lesson, we will explore two chapters from a book by I. A. Richards called *Principles of Literary Criticism*. We shall discuss, very briefly, literary criticism as it evolved



in the 19th and 20th century and try to place Richards in it. We will follow it up with a discussion of Chapter I and Chapter II of the book. It will be profitable if you approach this lesson after going through the chapters in question a few times.

2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Place *Principles of Literary Criticism* in the wider context of evolving literary criticism
- Develop an understanding of the main ideas that underpin *Principles of Literary Criticism*
- Write critical notes on “The Chaos of Critical Theories” and “The Phantom Aesthetic State”

3. LITERARY CRITICISM IN 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY

3.1 Romanticism and its Aftermath

Literary criticism, through much of its early years, remained glued to the Aristotelian ideas of perfection in form, proportion, and balance. The first major break with this line of thought came from what is now known as Romanticism. The Romantics privileged inspiration above everything else. Wordsworth, in his *Lyrical Ballads*, described poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. The Romantics were, in fact, championing what Plato had feared: the ability of the poet, in his inspired state, to reveal the transcendental reality of forms. In other words, for the Romantics, the function of poetry and the role of poets was to inspire through authentic personal feelings rather than propagate ideas of order, conventions, and rules. Romantics, thus, moved away from the rationalism and order associated with the earlier Neo-classicism.

It is also important to note that literary movements do not occur in a vacuum. At the turn of the 19th century, several important things were happening in England and Europe. Rousseau had published his book, *The Social Contract*, where he had declared that “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” The French revolution had a great impact on entire Europe and the ideas of individual liberty and rights were firmly entrenched. So, it is not surprising that the Romantics were more inclined towards a form of transcendental idealism. Though they did not agree on everything, what bound them together was the genuine belief that the poets were endowed with the ability to interpret the world for men.



They also believed in the healing power of imagination. However, they were far from developing a cogent theory of literature. They had argued, with reasonable success, for a literature that did not need an ethical dimension or promotion of virtue as its justification. Poetry, they believed, justified itself by its own coherence and its commitment to truth.

The late 19th century was a period of dramatic developments in industrial capitalism, technology, and commerce. Scientific developments came as a rude jolt to long-held religious beliefs and the society was torn between faith and doubt. This is also a period when the English novel flourished, helped, in no small measure, by the emergence of new social classes with money and leisure. The novel, unlike poetry, was more suited to reflect the social transformations that were taking place in a realistic manner. It had the potential to document those areas of human experience that could not be captured by poetry. The Romantic theory of literature, with its emphasis on individual inspiration as a means of interpreting the world, was of very little use in this new scenario. Elsewhere, in Europe and Russia, realistic and naturalistic approaches to literature were gaining ground. Naturalism, in literature, followed the methods of close observation followed in natural sciences. They believed that literature must explore all those social and other forces in society that shaped individual behaviour and relationships. Emilie Zola wanted writers to present 'a slice of life' as it is. So, in a sense, post-romantic disillusionment is what was driving writers and critics to find new ways of dealing with literature.

3.2 Matthew Arnold

Arnold was a poet before he became a literary critic. He is important because he is considered as, and perhaps quite rightly so, the first modern critic in England. He sits in between Romanticism and New Criticism. For Arnold, a critic's job was not just to decipher the internal beauty, coherence, or the defects of literary works. The job of the critic was to educate and propagate the finest ideas from all around him. He has an obligation to the society that he lives in and, in that sense, he is a kind of guardian of public taste. Criticism, Arnold says, in his *The Function of Criticism at the Present time* (1864), is essentially concerned with dissemination of ideas. The best that is known and practiced everywhere must be made visible. The object must be seen for what it is and evaluated irrespective of the socio-historical or psychological factors that might have played a role in its making. This particular emphasis, on focussing on the work of art itself, is what would interest the later critics and shape critical approaches at the turn of the century.

We shall skirt the details about Matthew Arnold's contribution as a literary critic and quickly go over some key ideas that influenced later critics. It is obvious, from the preceding paragraph, that Arnold wanted to inject some amount of objectivity into the critic's trade and



make it much more important and productive than the mere subjective evaluation of the beauty and shortcomings of literary texts. To achieve this, he introduced what is now known as the “touchstone method.” The idea that underpins this method is simple. To judge the relative merit of a literary text objectively, it must be compared with great literary works that already exist. This is essential because Arnold believed that contemporary literature is built on the foundations laid by the ancients. Classical literature provides the models that can inspire the contemporary writers to fashion great literary works. He advocates that critics must judge the value of contemporary works by comparing them to passages taken from great masters, and that these passages are to be used as touchstones. However, to champion a touchstone method is one thing and to put it into practice in a disinterested fashion is another. Arnold’s own preference for classicism, coloured much of his work as a critic and made him one-dimensional. However, whatever be the failings of Arnold as a critic, it cannot diminish his importance as one of the first major critics to proffer an objective approach to literary criticism at the expense of historical or biographical study.

3.3 At the Turn of the Century: I. A. Richards

At the turn of the century, there was an explosion of academic disciplines, methods, different kinds of literature, and above all, a blurring of disciplinary boundaries. Literary studies had already become an academic discipline in England and elsewhere. Literary studies were getting enriched by borrowing from disciplines as diverse as psychoanalysis, linguistics, philology, and anthropology. The search for an objective appreciation of literary works continued through various schools of thought. If at all anything can describe literary studies in the early 20th century, then it must be the multiplicity of views and divergent approaches from Russian Formalism to symbolism to naturalism and so on. Around this time developed a school of criticism that was later known as **New Criticism** and **I. A. Richards** is considered by many as its fountainhead. Richards started teaching at Cambridge University around the 1920s. Literary criticism, during this time, was oriented towards exploring literary texts by placing them in the context of a) the psychology of the writer, b) the socio-historical circumstances that the writer lived in and was possibly influenced by, and c) the writer’s intentions for writing. It is obvious then that the critics paid little or no attention to value or the distinct properties of the text in question. If you recall, we discussed earlier how literary criticism had always focussed on the formal properties and the value of literary texts. This focus on biography and psychology was taking literary criticism away from its major concerns. Richards found this unsatisfactory. Subsequently, in his book, **Principles of Literary Criticism**, he tries to bring the focus back, once again, on the question of value and the ways in which meaning is produced in literary texts.



Principles of Literary Criticism¹ was first published in 1924. It is a **seminal work** that presents Richards' ideas on the study and evaluation of literature. The book is organised in **thirty-five** chapters dealing with various aspects of literary criticism. The idea was to develop a formal system of analysing literary texts instead of relying too much on subjective beliefs and prejudices. The book emphasizes the importance of close reading, the reader's response, and the analysis of language in understanding and interpreting literary works.

Richards rejects the idea that the author's intentions are the sole determinant of a text's meaning. Instead, he promotes the **concept of practical criticism, which focuses on the direct study of texts rather than relying on external factors such as historical or biographical information about the author.** This approach encourages readers to derive meaning primarily from the words on the page and their personal response to them. He challenges two fallacies commonly observed in literary criticism: **the intentional fallacy** and **the affective fallacy.** While the former speculates on the **author's intentions, the latter relies solely on subjective, emotional responses as the basis for evaluating a work.** Richards argues instead for a **close reading,** which involves a detailed analysis of a text's language, themes, structure, and imagery. He believes that a careful examination of these elements leads to a deeper understanding of a literary work.

The book also highlights the **importance of language in literature.** Richards explores how **words, metaphors, and other rhetorical devices contribute to the meaning and impact of a work.** He encourages critics to pay close attention to linguistic choices and devices used by authors. Finally, he emphasizes the organic unity of a literary work. He argues that every part of a work contributes to its overall meaning and effect. Critics should analyse how different elements within a text interact and contribute to its structure and themes. However, in this lesson, we will confine ourselves to the first two chapters of the book and examine how Richards prepares the ground for developing his principles of literary criticism.

Check Your Progress-1

1. Discuss I.A. Richards's contribution to the development of New Criticism.
2. What did Richards wish to achieve by writing the book *Principles of Literary Criticism*?

¹ I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co Ltd, London, 1930. All subsequent reference to the text is from this edition.



4. THE CHAOS OF CRITICAL THEORIES (CHAPTER 1)

In the Preface to the book, Richards makes it clear that **literary criticism**, which he understood as an “endeavour to discriminate between experiences and to evaluate them,” was not possible “without some understanding of the nature of experience, or without theories of valuation and communication” (P.2). These principles have not found a place in literary criticism yet and all the principles that are found in literary criticism thus far are arbitrary. Thus, Richards regards his work as a point of departure. The first chapter, “The Chaos of Critical Theories” begins with the observation that literary criticism has in fact gathered a large body of work over the years and yet a survey of the field only shows that much of what we have gathered is fragmentary and lacks coherence between them.

The experiences (reading a book, watching a play, listening to music, etc.) that literary criticism deals with are plenty and present all around us. Richards holds that the questions that the critic must try to answer are also obvious. Some of the questions that the critics need to answer are: “What gives the experience of reading a poem its value? How is this experience better than another? Why prefer this picture to that? In which ways should we listen to music so as to receive the most valuable moments? Why is one opinion about works of art not as good as another?” (P.5) However, some preliminary questions need answers before we begin to approach these questions. Questions dealing with the nature of art, nature of experience, and questions dealing with value and valuations are fundamental questions. The answers to these questions will provide the context within which critics need to operate. These are not extraordinary questions, but a cursory survey of the field shows us that these questions remain unanswered till now. What we find, instead, are conjectures, prejudices and, not so often, some inspired formulations. Richards quotes a few established authorities in the field like Aristotle, Addison, Wordsworth, Coleridge, etc. to prove his point.

Some of the quotes Richards presents to further his arguments are: “All men naturally receive pleasure from imitation”; “Poetry is chiefly conversant with general truth”; “It demands an enthusiasm allied to madness; transported out of ourselves we become what we imagine”; “Beautiful words are the very and peculiar light of the mind”; “Delight is the chief, if not the only end; instruction can be admitted but in the second place”; “The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” (P.6-7) These quotes do show that the best minds of each generation have tried to arrive at some understanding of the value of literary works and yet have failed to provide a coherent theory of value. Richards is of the view that most of these are profitable starting points for further enquiry. But then how does one arrive at the true value of art? This failure begs the question: is literary criticism the right place to find answers



to the question of value? Richards turns to **empirical research into aesthetics** to see if one could find answers there. Empirical research into aesthetics has been quite useful in the sense that it has unravelled some of the processes that contribute to our appreciation of works of art. Many of these studies have used the psychological laboratory to conduct scientific studies on the nature and appreciation of beauty. However, the results are mixed. When the **experiments deal with simple subjects, a line from a poem, a single note of music, or colours, etc., the results are quite encouraging.** But when the subject becomes a little more complex, the results are uncertain. However, even the results from studies of simple subjects have shown that there can be a great variety of responses from various people at various times and contexts. Even the same person may have different responses to something like a particular colour at different times. It is easy to conclude from this observation that more complex subjects would, of necessity, produce an even greater variety of responses. Richards points out that this could be disastrous for literary criticism where comparing experiences is a key task. If comparing experiences becomes willy-nilly impossible then how are we to decide on the question of value?

The answer to this question is simple. The point is, it is difficult to contemplate a simple object in isolation. A word like 'night', as pointed out by Richards, would mean nothing by itself. But it could produce a host of divergent responses because each reader puts it in a context of his own and that in turn evokes a certain kind of feeling in the reader. But when the same word is put in a sentence the context is narrowed down and the variation in responses also gets narrowed down. For instance, a sentence like 'I am walking on a deserted road on a dark night' is already limited by the context of a man walking on a deserted road. As we expand the context by placing the sentence in a paragraph, or in a whole poem, the meaning gets further narrowed down and the feelings it evokes become more or less similar with readers of the same competence. **Hence, a theory of literary criticism may not have much use for experimental aesthetics.** Richards concludes the chapter by pointing out that the question will be discussed in detail later.

Check Your Progress-2

1. What, according to Richards, is the main function of literary criticism?
2. What would a survey of Literary Criticism reveal?
3. What are the principal drawbacks of literary criticism as it is practised?
4. What are the questions the literary critics must answer when dealing with a literary text?



5. LET'S SUM UP

Let us review what we have learnt in this chapter, “The Chaos of Critical Theories.” We have learnt that:

- I. The main task of literary criticism is to discriminate between experiences of reading literary texts and to find what is valuable or, in other words, ascribe value to literary texts.
- II. To be able to do that a literary critic must answer questions like what gives the experience of reading a certain poem its value. How is one experience better than another? Why should we privilege one opinion over the other?
- III. There are some fundamental questions that need to be answered before engaging with literary texts. Questions like what is a picture, or what is value, and how can experiences be compared, are key to further exploration of literary texts.
- IV. A survey of literary criticism attempted thus far shows that the great minds of the past have hardly come close to answering these questions. What we find in their work is fragmented assessments based on prejudices, whims, some genuine speculation, etc.
- V. The language of criticism has mostly remained vague and often created more confusion rather than shedding light.
- VI. Criticism often tends to focus on secondary aspects of art rather than on the primary issue of value. Instead of dealing with the effects that objects evoke in us, it treats the object as if it possesses some inherent qualities.
- VII. A major impediment to a valid literary criticism comes from ‘experimental aesthetics.’ While it does provide us with the insight that human tastes and feelings can vary immensely, it is of very little use when we deal with complex objects like a poem. The variety of feelings is inversely proportional to the complexity of the object.
- VIII. And, finally, Richards has a word of caution for criticism. He says criticism has become a disguised form of expressing the feelings and attitudes of the critic towards the poem and the poet that he is discussing, and that there is a need to focus on the poem instead.

6. THE PHANTOM AESTHETIC STATE (CHAPTER II)

In this chapter Richards discusses an even bigger problem with aesthetics. Modern aesthetic theories rest on the assumption that there indeed is a kind of mental activity that is distinct



and unique, and this mental activity is at the heart of all kinds of aesthetic experiences. This formulation is not very disturbing. But, following Kant, when we characterise this experience as “disinterested, universal, unintellectual, and not to be confused with the pleasures of sense or of ordinary emotions, in short to make it a thing *sui generis*...,” it creates a huge problem. Richards is of the view that all works of art give rise to valuable experiences. Whether they help us in analysis is a different matter and depends on the theory of value we adopt. But this Kantian disinterested pleasure is *sui generis*, or in other words it is a one-of-a-kind experience that is complete in itself and cannot be compared to anything else in ordinary life. Richards is in complete disagreement with this formulation and rejects the idea of the aesthetic mode or aesthetic state.

The “phantom problem of the aesthetic mode or aesthetic state” (P.11) arises from this idea of uniqueness of aesthetic pleasure. Richards goes back to discuss the emergence of this idea from Immanuel Kant onwards. He quotes Kant: “All the faculties of the Soul, or capacities, are reducible to three, which do not admit of any further derivation from a common ground: the faculty of knowledge, the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and the faculty of desire” (P.12). This tripartite division coincides with Understanding, Judgment, and Reason, respectively. Just as pleasure is bracketed by knowledge and desire, so is Judgment bracketed by understanding and reason. Kant placed aesthetics in the province of judgment. When we link these faculties with the abstract ideas of Truth, Beauty, and Good, we see that while Truth could be identified with thought because it deals with the intellectual part of the mind, and Good with reason because it deals with the willing or practical part, Beauty falls in the middle and gets identified with feelings. This is a complete mismatch because all feelings, especially feelings of displeasure, cannot be beautiful. Richards points out that this impasse creates a need for a category that could accommodate beauty. And, of necessity, this had to be, “Some activity that was neither inquisitive nor practical, that did not question and did not seek to use” (P.13). This was the aesthetic mode. This was a mode in which the aesthetic or contemplative activity would be carried out in an impersonal and detached fashion. They would provide no intellectual stimulation nor fulfil any desire.

Richards questions the possibility of the existence of an aesthetic state or any aesthetic experience that is totally unique. There is hardly any doubt that various kinds of experiences exist in the contemplation of art. But the question is, are they different from other kinds of ordinary experiences? To understand if one kind of experience is anything like another kind of experience, we need to compare the likeness or otherwise. If we agree that there are indeed various kinds of experiences in contemplation of works of art, and that experience of beauty may have various causes, we still need to identify if there is a degree of



difference that would make it specific. Richards believes that this is a question of degree of difference and not easily measurable. And yet many post-Kantian writers hold on to the position that the **aesthetic experience is both peculiar and specific.**

There are two ways in which the existence of a peculiar and specific aesthetic experience is put forward. The first one is to posit some kind of a special mental element that facilitates only an aesthetic experience and interferes with no other kind of experience. **Clive Bell calls it an aesthetic emotion that is unique.** However, psychology allows no such category and, hence, this is not tenable. The second one is to invest the usual aesthetic experience with a special form in terms of disinterestedness, distance, impersonality, and so on. But Richards dismisses this contention as nothing but an effect of communication. He goes on to suggest that there is no such aesthetic mode that is so unique that it has nothing in common with the experiences of ugliness as well as beauty, or with a whole host of experiences that one may not categorise as aesthetic. He agrees that there may be a narrow range of aesthetic experiences that are confined to beauty and imply value, but he adds that these experiences are similar to many other experiences and that what distinguishes them are chiefly the connections between their constituents. These aesthetic experiences are only a finer organisation, or putting together of ordinary experiences and are not completely different kind of things. **The dangers of assuming that an aesthetic experience is peculiar is that it creates the possibility of a peculiar aesthetic value removed from everything else around it.** He quotes Clive Bell, “To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions” (P.17). This view of art, Richards considers, is a great obstacle to an investigation of their value. This has given rise to a regrettable narrowing of interests and an aloofness. Pushing art to the realm of mystery and linking it up to an aesthetic mood is, in the last instance, harmful and limits the role and influence of literature in society.

Check Your Progress-3

1. What is the grave defect of aesthetics?
2. What does Kant say about aesthetic experience?
3. Which are the two ways to identify whether a distinct aesthetic species of experience exists or not?



7. LET`S SUM UP

Let us review what we have learnt in this chapter, “The Phantom Aesthetic State.” We have learnt that:

- I. Modern aesthetic theories rest on the assumption that there indeed is a kind of mental activity that is distinct and unique, and this mental activity is at the heart of all kinds of aesthetic experiences.
- II. Richards is of the view that all works of art give rise to valuable experiences. It is this question of value which critics have ignored thus far.
- III. Kantian disinterested pleasure is **sui generis**, or in other words, it is a one-of-a-kind experience that is complete in itself and cannot be compared to anything else in ordinary life.
- IV. The aesthetic mode was postulated to accommodate the category of beauty. This was a mode in which the aesthetic or contemplative activity would be carried out in an impersonal and detached fashion. They would provide no intellectual stimulation nor fulfil any desire.
- V. There are two ways in which the existence of a peculiar and specific aesthetic experience is put forward. The first one is to posit some kind of a special mental element that facilitates only an aesthetic experience and interferes with no other kind of experience.
- VI. The second one is to invest the usual aesthetic experience with a special form in terms of disinterestedness, distance, impersonality, and so on.
- VII. Richards suggests that there is no such aesthetic mode that is so unique that it has nothing in common with the experience’s ugliness as well as beauty, or with a whole host of experiences that one may not categorise as aesthetic.
- VIII. Aesthetic experiences are only a finer organisation or putting together of ordinary experiences and are not completely different kinds of things.
- IX. Regarding the experience of art as some kind of mystery, and linking it up to an aesthetic mood is, in the last instance, harmful and limits the role and influence of literature in society.



Further Reading:

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Web Links

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(i) ‘The Language of Paradox’ (ii) ‘The Heresy of Paraphrase’

From: *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*

Cleanth Brooks

Nalini Prabhakar

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This lesson will enable you to:

- Understand the basic principles of Cleanth Brooks’ critical theory.
- Comprehend how the “language of poetry is the language of paradox”.
- Outline the significant aspects of “The Heresy of Paraphrase”.

2. INTRODUCTION

Cleanth Brooks (1906–1994) was a professor and a highly reputed literary critic who altered the manner in which we engage with literary texts, especially poetry. He belonged to the school of New Criticism which shifted the focus from socio-historical and biographical analysis to structural and textual analysis. I.A. Richards’ *Practical Criticism* and *Principles of Literary Criticism* formed the foundational texts for New Criticism. The basic principles of formalist/New Criticism are:

- Form and meaning of a poem are intrinsically linked; for any meaningful interpretation of a poem, it is necessary to understand its underlying form/ structure. We will deal with structure/form in detail in “The heresy of Paraphrase”.
- Poems should not be reduced to simple “paraphrase” (with a liberal dose of biographical and historical contexts) as it robs the poem of its very essence.
- A poet uses a variety of poetic devices like irony, paradox, metaphors, symbols, and ambiguity which prevent the reduction of a poem to a “paraphrase”.
- Any serious literary criticism should neither consider the readers emotional response as an analytical tool (Affective fallacy), nor should it explain a text by focusing on the intention and motivation of the author (Intentional fallacy).



- A critic should look into what is there within the text, and how the various parts within it are related. Consequently, practitioners of New Criticism focused on aspects such as, paradox, irony, wordplay, puns, imagery, metaphors, etc., within a text, and linked them within the larger context of the text to reveal the underlying larger structures.

The two chapters prescribed for your study are from *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947). Brooks uses a wide range of poems to work out the various principles of New Criticism which we have briefly dealt with in the previous paragraph. Some of these poems you have already studied in Semester I and II. Read the following poems again before you approach the chapters prescribed for your study.

- Wordsworth : ‘Composed Upon Westminster Bridge’, ‘It is a Beauteous Evening’
- Gray : ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’
- Donne : ‘Canonization’
- Pope : ‘Rape of the Lock’
- Keats : ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’
- Yeats : ‘Among School Children’
- Tennyson : ‘Tears, Idle Tears’

Check Your Progress

1. What are the basic principles of New Criticism?
2. How is it different from the other kind of Criticism?

3. THE LANGUAGE OF PARADOX-INTRODUCTION

Before we begin to understand Cleanth Brooks' essay “The Language of Paradox,” it is necessary to know the definition of the term “paradox.” The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines paradox as “a statement or expression that is so surprisingly self-contradictory that it prompts us to seek another sense or context in which it would be true.” Brooks claims that “the language of poetry is the language of paradox” (p.3), and this language is “appropriate and inevitable” for poetry. However readers and critics alike have often



neglected paradox as compared to other poetic devices primarily due to a prejudice, as paradox is thought of as “intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational”(p.3). Poetry is generally understood as communicating profound thoughts and emotions which ennoble the soul, and hence paradox cannot be the appropriate literary device to do so. He, however, claims that the “truth” which a poet tries to convey can only be arrived at by the use of paradox. In this essay he demonstrates how a poet conveys his thoughts and ideas by using paradox, and thereby avoids making direct statements in poetry. He uses John Donne's poem “The Canonization,” and William Wordsworth's poems “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” and “It is a Beauteous Evening,” to establish his case.

Check Your Progress

1. What is a paradox?
2. What reasons does Brooks offer for the neglect of paradox as a poetic tool?

3.1 The Language of Paradox: Summary

In the ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads,’ William Wordsworth laid emphasis on the simplicity of subject matter and transparency of language in his poetry and hence, critics assume that paradox is outside Wordsworth’s scheme of things. Cleanth Brooks shows how Wordsworth employs the language of paradox in “It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free” and “Upon Westminster Bridge.” Our understanding of the poems is incomplete if we do not take into consideration the paradoxes at work in these poems. The first poem opens with the following lines:

**“It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration.”**

The poet has likened the evening to a nun here, but it has more than one connotation. At that sacred hour of the evening, the poet is filled with a sense of reverence, but the girl who walks beside him does not share this sense of worship. The lines suggest that she should respond to the holy hour of prayers by becoming like a ‘nun, breathless with adoration,’ like the evening itself. However, the girl is filled with an unconscious affection and sympathy for all of Nature. His subliminal adoration and worship are similar to her unconscious devotion to



nature with one major difference; whereas his devotion is limited to a specific time period, her devotion is permanent and not restricted to any one time period.

Herein lies the paradox; How can someone or something be worshipped unintentionally or secretly? It is a paradoxical situation. The implication here is that the girl is more pious than the poet. Her piety springs from being completely in communion with 'nature,' so much so that the evening's peace and tranquillity pale in comparison to her absolute devotion to nature. Here the calm of the evening (worship), much like the nun's habit, which is visible to all with a hint of "Pharisaical holiness"(p.5), is juxtaposed with the girl's worship which is innocent, unconscious, and natural .

Brooks now turns his attention to Wordsworth's other poem "Lines Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," and points out that it is rich in literary value and beauty not because of the poet's deft use of images, or the grandeur of feeling, but because of its paradoxical situation. This setting delivers a wide range of ideas to the reader. Wordsworth writes :

**"Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendor, valley, rock or hill;"**

The poet is surprised that the city of London can "wear the beauty of the morning" which is reserved for the more natural places like Mount Snowdon or Mont Blanc. The "smokeless air" and the Thames River running freely with no impediments in her way, makes him realise that London in the early morning light devoid of its hustle and bustle, is indeed organic, and not mechanical and dead. It seems to the poet as a part of Nature, and hence it is natural. It is like the lovely flowers or mountain brooks.

**"Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!"**

The poet views London as an organic element of the whole, rather than an inanimate or mechanical thing. He employs the phrase 'asleep' as though the dwellings are real beings. They are alive and contribute to the life of nature as if they were a part of her, rather than apart from her. It is worth noting that the word 'asleep' is a semblance of death, and it is at this time, when the city and its heart is asleep, that the poet realizes that London is alive. Wordsworth stated in his renowned work, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," that his major purpose was to select episodes and circumstances from the lives of rustics and simple people. What Wordsworth wants his readers to understand is that what appears to be normal and commonplace is actually unusual. Coleridge writes, "Mr.Wordsworth...was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of everyday and to excite a



feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us..." (p.7).

It should be emphasised that neoclassical writers, such as Alexander Pope, make excellent use of paradoxes and irony; paradoxical statements transmit a wide variety of thoughts to the reader. Pope approached the subject of "Essay on Man" in a fresh way. According to Cleanth Brooks, paradoxes and irony are nurtured in the poet's language, which includes both connotation and denotation. It is also worth noting that several of William Wordsworth's poems have an excellent combination of irony and paradox. William Blake's and Thomas Gray's works are no exception. In his poem "The Ancient Mariner," Samuel Taylor Coleridge deftly employs these poetical tropes.

Brooks, in this essay, also draws our attention to the difference between the language of science and poetry. Science, according to him, has a propensity to render words lifeless and straightforward via the use of denotations. In poetry, the poet introduces new terminology by departing from their denotative and dictionary meanings. Science employs straight terms that are rather strict, but poets use poetical tools such as paradoxes, ambiguity, metaphors and irony to hint at the message and meaning of their work; the language of poetry cannot be direct. Brooks claims that directness of language is useless in poetry, and that forthright statements in poetry misrepresent what is meant to be communicated.

Brooks examines John Donne's poem "Canonization," to further explain his point. In this poem as in all other poems, John Donne employs numerous surprising images, metaphors, paradoxes, that appeal to the reader's heart and mind. Canonization is defined as "an official act of a Christian communion - mainly the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church- declaring one of its deceased members worthy of public cult and entering his or her name in the canon, or the authorized list, of that communion's recognized saints" (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Going by this definition, the title itself is a paradox. What is being canonized and made sacred, in this poem, is the sensual love between a man and a woman, which the world considers as immoral. The poem as a whole, is filled with paradoxes. John Donne has presented profane love as if it were spiritual and holy love. Critics have often said that John Donne did not believe in love, and that in his love poetry he was only honing his wit as a mechanical exercise. Brooks, however, maintains that John Donne treated both religion and love seriously, and the supposed contradiction between the two, became an efficient tool for Donne to shock and surprise his readers.

In the poem "Canonization," the speaker addresses a quiet listener, who may be seen as a representative of the practical world, which regards love as a futile and worthless pursuit.



The two lovers in the poem, escape the secular world's conventions, norms, and constraints. The lover tells the listener that he can chide him about everything else, other than his love:

**“Or chide my palsie, or my gout,
My five gray haire, or ruin ‘d fortune flout.”**

In these lines, the lover encourages the audience not to think of his love as diseased and immoral, and instead to focus on his other shortcomings, his palsy and his approaching old age. The love shared by the lovers should not be criticised because no one is hurt by it. In short, love causes no harm to anybody, even though it looks foolish and immoral to the rest of the world. By withdrawing from the physical world, the lovers are rewarded with a far higher status in the other realm. The lover goes on to say:

**“Call us what you will, we are made such by love
Call her one, me another fly,
We’re Tapers too, and at our own cost die.
And we in us find the Eagle and the Dove;
The Phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us, we two being one, are it
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.”**

We find a series of comparisons -- the lovers are like the tapers consumed by the heat of their love, they are like an eagle and a dove, as well as a phoenix. The eagle represents power, while the dove represents sobriety and kindness. As a result, the lovers possess both male and feminine characteristics. The phoenix is a hybrid of both sexes. Because the lovers are one, they merge both sexes. Their love is reborn and regenerated in the fire of their passion for one another, and it continues to develop fresh and new like a phoenix. It is crucial to remember that, throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the word 'die,' in an alternate sense, also indicated the culmination of the sexual act. Their love has not been completely spent, but it has been rejuvenated and revitalised after completion. Their love is like a phoenix rising from its own ashes. Donne has heightened the paradox by using a phoenix metaphor.

**“We can die by it, if not live by love,
And if unfit for tombs or hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse.”**



The poet has conveyed the dedication of two lovers who are willing to die for love, even though their love is regarded as immoral and foolish by the rest of the world. It should be emphasised that the word 'legend' here, refers to the 'life of a saint'. Even if their love is not documented in the chronicle, they would be content to be observed and remembered in small sonnets. In the essay's conclusion, Brooks writes, "I submit that the only way the poet could say what "The Canonization" says is by paradox" (p.16).

Check Your Progress

1. Do you agree with Brooks that the language of poetry is the language of paradox? Explain in the context of the poems discussed.

4. THE HERESY OF PARAPHRASE - INTRODUCTION

"The Heresy of Paraphrase" is the last chapter in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* and Brooks, right at the start, states that this chapter is meaningful only to those who find his readings of the ten poems, in the previous ten chapters, adequate. His two main contentions in this essay are: 1. In any given poem, the form/structure and content form a unified whole and hence, to experience the poem in its entirety, we must analyse all those elements which constitute its structure. 2. A poem cannot be reduced to a paraphrase or a denotative meaning, as this would amount to denying it its very essence.

4.1 The Heresy of Paraphrase- Summary

Brooks draws our attention to the fact that all of the poems in the previous chapters, have a "common goodness...not in terms of content or subject matter, but rather in terms of structure... we must draw a sharp distinction between the attractiveness or beauty of any particular item taken as such and the 'beauty' of the poem considered as a whole"(p.178). The underlying pattern in the poem holds together the ambiguity, irony, paradoxes, images and metaphors and gives the poem its unity. The structure is not to be understood in the simplistic sense of a wrapper or an envelope and reduced to a "metrical pattern or a sequence of images" (p.178). The kind of the content, that enters into the poem, definitely has an impact on the form. Brooks describes structure/form as a collection of "meanings, evaluations, and interpretations, and the principle of unity which informs it appears to be one of balancing and harmonising connotations, attitudes, and meanings" (p.178). This idea neither means mechanically putting together similar elements nor does it mean harmonizing the opposing



elements by subtraction. Brooks emphasises his search for “adequate terms,” -- terms such as “ambiguity,’ ‘paradox,’ ‘complex of attitudes,’ and ‘irony’ -- which he has used in the previous chapters while analysing diverse poems that “do justice to the special kind of structure that seems to emerge as the common structure of poems as diverse on other counts as are “The Rape of the Lock” and “Tears, Idle Tears”(p.179).

Brooks disagrees with the common formula used by most critics that a poem makes a definitive statement which is expressed by the poet in a beautiful manner. Most heresies about poetry stem from this approach as it forces the critic to analyse the poem by extraneous factors such as its “political, scientific, or philosophic truth”. It is precisely for this refusal to admit that poems convey messages that Alfred Kazin criticizes the New Critics’ method, and accuses them of ranking poems by their “formal embellishments”. Brooks dismisses Kazin’s contention by stating that all good poems inherently carry within them, checks that deter attempts to paraphrase them. Brooks believes that any attempt to read a final core meaning in a poem is immediately thwarted; “the imagery and rhythm seem to set up tensions with it, warping and twisting it, qualifying and revising it.” (p.180) Wordsworth’s “Ode,” Donne’s “The Canonisation,” Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock,” and Herrick’s “Corinna’s Going a-Maying,” amply illustrate this point. The tension that informs poetry like this is not easily overcome. We “mistake matters grossly,” he claims, if we interpret the poem as toying with opposing extremes in order to indicate the golden mean in a theory that, in the end, would correct the falsity of extremes. The point Brooks makes is that the “‘prose-sense’ of the poem is not a rack on which the stuff of the poem is hung, that it does not represent the “inner” structure, the “essential” structure, or the “real” structure of the poem” (p.182), and that all attempts to formulate the ‘statement’ made by a poem, “lead away from the centre of the poem -- not towards it.”(p.182) Such viewpoints, he contends, are simply “scaffoldings which we may properly throw about the building for certain purposes: we must not mistake them for the internal and essential structure of the building itself.”(p.182). Indeed, he emphasises that most errors in criticism arise from succumbing to the temptation to mistake certain remarks we make about the poem -- statements about what it says, truths it provides, or formulations it illustrates -- for the essential core of the poem itself.

Critics who ignore the fact that “form and content, or content and medium, are inseparable” (p.183) tend to underplay the essential elements of the poem, and prioritize the paraphrasable elements. This disturbs the organic harmony of the poem and the relation between the various elements. Such critics are guilty of, what Brooks refers to as “paraphrastic heresy,” or the heresy of paraphrase, wherein the form and content of a poem are treated as separate entities, thereby tampering with the internal order of the poem. Brooks



maintains that “one can never measure a poem against the scientific or philosophical yardstick for the reason that the poem, when laid against the yardstick, is never the 'full poem,' but an abstraction from the poem” (p.185). For instance, the ambiguity in Keats’ line, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” can only be comprehended when it is related to the context of the entire poem, and is not seen as a summarizing proposition. If a single line in a poem can be viewed as encompassing the whole meaning of the poem, then the rest of the poem may well have not been written. Certain lines can be used to aid our sense of the poem, but should not be mistaken for the “inner core” of the poem. It is futile to look for logical conclusions in a poem; the ending of a poem presents the working out of the various tensions by employing propositions, metaphors, and symbols.

Unlike a scientist, a poet is constantly obliged to reinvent language. “The word as the poet uses it, has to be conceived of not as a discrete particle of meaning, but as a potential of meaning, a nexus or cluster of meanings” (p.192). Brooks claims that “poet after poet” preferred “ambiguity and paradox rather than plain discursive simplicity” (p.194). A poet and a scientist view experience in diametrically opposite ways. A scientist breaks it down into components, discriminating between them, and classifying them, whereas the poet tries to unify experience. “The poem, if it be a true poem, is a simulacrum of reality – in this sense, at least, it is an 'imitation' -- by being an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience” (p.194).

Check Your Progress

1. What are the two main contentions in this essay?
2. What, according to Brooks, constitutes the structure of a poem?
3. Why does Brooks call the paraphrasing of a poem a heresy?

Reference

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