

## **PAPER – LITERARY CRITICISM**

### **Explication of *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment***

#### **Introduction**

Practical criticism began in the 1920s with a series of experiments by I.A. Richards on his students to assess poems on their own, on which no information regarding authorship or any other extraneous information was provided. Richards wanted his students to concentrate on the “words on the page”, rather than rely on predetermined or accepted opinions of the text. Such a method would have positive psychological effects on the students because they would respond to the myriad emotions and meanings that would result in an “organised response”. This meant that they would clarify the diverse undercurrents of thoughts in the poem and relate their own emotions with them and arrive at a response that would encompass the thoughts which are in an organised form.

William Empson, in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), in connection with this project, developed the under-graduate essays for Richards to study of connotative and complex meanings in poems. His method ushered a novel approach of critical analysis known as “New Criticism”. New Critics emphasised on a close analysis of texts, paying little attention to historical or biographical details of a poem. For F.R. Leavis, the close analysis of a text is a moral activity, in which the critic would employ his sensibility on the literary text and examine its sincerity and moral seriousness.

New Criticism would entail concentrating on the form and meaning of particular works, rather than theoretical questions and practice of criticism would not entail social or economic bearings as well as biographical considerations of the author.

#### **The Text**

Divided into four parts, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (1929), elaborates Richards’ views on the practice of literary criticism. The first part, titled “Introductory”, is an introduction to his critical practice, where he expounds the three-fold purpose in writing the book. Part two, “Documentation” contains the thirteen poems for his students’ analyses and Part three, “Analysis” the most significant of the four chapters, where his critical precepts are explained. The eight chapters in this section are:

- Four Kinds of Meaning
- Figurative Language
- Sense and Feeling
- Poetic Form
- Irrelevant Associations and Stock Responses
- Sentimentality and Inhibition
- Doctrine in Poetry
- Technical Presuppositions and Critical Preconceptions.

Part four is titled “Summary and Recommendations” followed by the Appendices A to D.

In the introduction, Richards mentions the three objectives in writing the book. First, to introduce a new kind of documentation to those who are interested in the contemporary state of culture for critics, philosophers, teachers, psychologists or those who are just curious onlookers. Second, to provide a new technique for those interested in reading poetry to decide why they should like it or not, and the third to develop better

methods of critical analyses that are different from the existing ones. For this purpose, he has given poems to his students without revealing any information about the poets who wrote them.

Richards analyses the factors that lead to misreading of poems:

1. The difficulty to comprehend the plain sense of a poem is one of the aspects. Many students fail to understand the meaning of a poem; often the feeling, tone and intention of a poem are also misunderstood.
2. Likewise, words have a movement or rhythm even when read in silence. Many readers fail to capture the sensuousness and rhythm inherent in poetry.
3. Imagery, especially visual imagery is difficult to interpret. Images that take shape in one mind may be different from others, but these images may not be connected to the images that existed in the poet's mind.
4. The credible influence of irrelevant mnemonics, which is the private and personal associations, affects reading texts.
5. Stock responses based on private judgements intrude when a poem's opinions and emotions are readily available to the reader's mind.
6. Display of excessive emotions.
7. Inhibitions function as hindrances in understanding poetry.
8. Indoctrination, which is views and beliefs about the world contained in poetry, could become the foundation for confusion or unreliable judgement.
9. Technical conjectures can cause difficulty. When something has once been done in a certain manner and if it is done differently that is beyond recognition, it calls for assessing a poem from outside by technical details.
10. Lastly, the general critical preconceptions resulting from theories about the nature and value of poetry intervene between the reader and the poem.

Richards concludes that critical reading of poetry is an arduous task. In this regard he mentions: "The lesson of all criticism is that we have nothing to rely upon in making our choices but ourselves." This means that the lesson of good poetry, if properly understood, lies in the extent to which ordering of the individual mind takes place. Response to emotion and meaning would result in an "organised response" that would materialise into "psychologism", which is not concerned with the poem but the responses to it.

### Four Kinds of Meaning

Close textual and verbal analysis of poetry is elaborated in Richards' *Practical Criticism*, *The Meaning of Meaning* and *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Language is comprised of words and hence the study of words is of immense significance in understanding a work of art. Words communicate four kinds of meaning: sense, feeling, tone and intention. The interplay of these four entities constitutes meaning in poetry. **Sense:** Sense is communicated by the literal meanings of words. The speaker speaks to arouse the listener's interest. When the writer makes an utterance, he appeals to his listeners' attention on some matters, affairs or items for their thought or consideration.

**Feeling:** The writer's emotional attitude towards the subject. He uses language to express feelings in poetry. Feeling adds colour to poetry. In poetry, feeling and sense

are mutually dependent. Richards mentions: "The sound of a word has much to do with the feeling it evokes." Emotion is as important as the use of rhyme or meter.

**Tone:** Tone refers to the attitude of the writer towards his listener. The writer chooses and arranges the words according to the level of his audience. This means that the writer's tone varies in accordance with the type of listener.

**Intention:** Intention refers to the aim, purpose or objective of the speaker. The speaker could speak either consciously or unconsciously. The listener has to comprehend the objective of the speaker to understand his meaning. Devoid of this understanding, the speaker is a failure. The intention of the author is found in dramatic and semi-dramatic literature and controls the plot. The points in an argument are stressed by the intention.

These four aspects taken together would account for meaning in poetry. They cannot be separated and they are indispensable to the meaning of a text. Sense predominates over scientific language and feeling in poetry.

### **Figurative language**

The figurative language used by poets conveys emotions effectively and forcefully. Words acquire rich associative value in different contexts. The meaning of a poem is inferred by the use of rhyme and meter. Just as the eye is accustomed to the proper spelling in the text, the mind, after reading a few lines of verse starts to anticipate the flow of poetry. This anticipation becomes accurate when there is harmony and regularity of sound formed through rhythm and meter.

### **The Use of Metaphoric Language**

The use of metaphoric language is important for communication. Richards mentions: "A metaphor is a shift, a carrying over of a word from its normal use to a new use". This means that metaphors are used to convey special meanings that are suggestive. Metaphors are of two kinds: sense-metaphors, and emotive-metaphors. In a sense-metaphor, the shift is because of the likeness between the original object and the new one. In the emotive-metaphor, the shift is the result of the similarity between the feelings, the new situation and the normal situation that arises. The contextual differences between words may result in the sense metaphor or the emotive one.

By the use of metaphor, the writer can cram into a poem, more than what could be accommodated. Metaphorical meaning arises from the inter-connections between sense, tone, feeling and intention. As Richards observes: "A metaphor is a point at which many different influences may cross or unite. Hence its dangers in prose discussions and its treacherousness for careless readers of poetry, but hence, at the same time, its peculiar quasi-magical sway in the hands of a master." The deft use of metaphor in poetry generates innumerable impressions that would otherwise be difficult to express. Richards sums up his discussion by proclaiming that statements turn out to be the indirect expressions of sense, feeling, tone and intention.

### **Richards' Doctrine in Poetry**

Richards gives importance to the role of the reader in locating the meaning of a poem. The meaning of a poem rests in the readers' analysis of the text and the response to it. Readers analyse the text and frame judgments related to it. Every reader is capable of deciphering the same meaning in the same text and the text is an organic

whole, however obstacles occur when variation of meaning arises. Richards' ideas are oriented toward differentiating the belief of readers from that of poets. At the rise of contradiction between the belief of readers and the poets, the readers fail to comprehend the entire meaning from the text. The differences between the temperament of the reader and his personal experience, give rise to differences in the meaning from the text. The hindrance that brings variation in meaning is the doctrinal belief of the readers.

Richards locates two kinds of beliefs: Intellectual belief and Emotional belief. Whereas intellectual belief estimates an idea to a doctrine, emotional belief relates to the state of mind. The blending of the intellectual and the emotional beliefs results in a good kind of being. Variation in meaning occurs when there is freedom for beliefs and disbeliefs, however, human mind cannot be freed from the impure thoughts. Therefore, the reader should consciously take efforts to obtain every single meaning even when obstacles arise. The sincere reader has perfect and genuine mind that is free from impurities, and in this sense, the reader would be free from obstructions due to restricted flow of thoughts.

### **The Psychological Approach of Richards**

Richards attributes a healing property to poetry because of its ability to organise human impulses. Art possesses the capacity to restore emotional balance, mental equilibrium and peace. The human mind becomes capable of organizing itself. A society that promotes art exhibits better mental and emotional calmness than societies that discourage arts. Art provides pleasure due to the harmonious blend of the faculties that recognise the greatness of art. The complex thoughts, feelings, and desires get stimulated by arts and they are put into order leading to peace and pleasure.

Close analysis of anonymous poems intend to give psychological benefits to students. By actively responding to the currents of emotions, feelings and impulses, the students would arrive at "organized response". Richards says that catharsis does not result from the purgation of any impulse; it is the outcome of the harmonious blend of contradictory impulses. Richards' psychological approach resolves the old controversy regarding the sources of tragic pleasure and the nature of tragic catharsis.

To conclude, in the words of George Watson: "Richards is simply the most influential theorist of the century, as Eliot is the most influential of descriptive critics." Richards is believed to have announced the arrival of Anglo-American New Criticism of the thirties and forties. The technique of verbal analysis is built on his theoretical foundations. Under the influence of Richards, criticism was viewed as a scientific endeavour that considered the primacy of psychology for its functioning.

### **Summary**

To put it in brief, New Criticism is a kind of analyses on specific literary texts, either as deliberate application of an earlier formulated theory or a non-theoretical investigation. I.A. Richards, at the Cambridge University, in the 1920s, illustrated this practice in his book, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (1929). In this exercise, students were asked to analyse a concise poem without any information about the author, date or conditions under which the work was produced. By this method, Richards intended to concentrate on the "words on the page" only without referring to

the biographical or historical contexts. This procedure of analysis was adopted by the Cambridge school and became the most preferred scheme of rigorous criticism in British and American Universities.

## **References**

### **Web Links**

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/I-A-Richards>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/i-a-richards>

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/27543909?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/27543909?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100419910>

<https://www.britannica.com/>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Practical-Criticism>

Atkins, G. Douglas, and Laura Morrow, editors. *Contemporary Literary Theory*. The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989.

Barry, Peter, editor. *Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory: A Selection of Critical Essays*. Macmillan, 1987.

Blamires, Harry. *A History of Literary Criticism*. Macmillan, 1990.

Eagleton Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Basil Blackwell, 1985.

Lodge, David, editor. *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*. Longman, 1972.

Newton, K.M. *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*. Macmillan, 1997.

Ransom, John Crowe. *The New Criticism*. New Directions, 1941.

Richards, I.A. *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*. Read Books Limited, 2013.

Selden, Raman, editor. *The Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present: A Reader*. Longman, 1988.

Wellek, René. *Concepts of Criticism*. Yale University Press, 1973.

Wimsatt, William K. Jr., and Cleanth Brooks. *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. Oxford, 1957.

## **OBJECTIVES**

- Introduce the text *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*
- Comprehend the significant arguments in the specific chapters of the text.
- Comprehend the four kinds of meaning.
- Frame Richards' use of psychology in the text.
- Understand the significance of the text.

## **Frequently asked Questions (FAQ)**

**Answer the following questions in a sentence or two.**

1. What are the beginnings of practical criticism?

a. Practical criticism began in the 1920s with a series of experiments by I.A. Richards on his students to assess poems on their own devoid of information regarding authorship or any other extraneous information.

2. What did Richards want his students to do?

a. Richards wanted his students to concentrate on the "words on the page", rather than rely on predetermined or accepted opinions of the text.

3. What is “organized response”, according to Richards?
  - a. Response to the myriad emotions and meanings that would result in an “organised response”, by which students can clarify the diverse undercurrents of thoughts and achieve a similar explanation of their own emotions.
4. What does F.R. Leavis mean by “close analysis” ?
  - a. For F.R. Leavis, the close analysis of a text is a moral activity, in which the critic would employ his sensibility on the literary text and examine its sincerity and moral seriousness.
5. How can the behavior of a person be estimated?
  - a. The behaviour of a person can be distinguished with regard to the stimuli received and the way in which it could be put into use.

**Answer the questions in a paragraph of 100 words**

1. The three objectives in writing the book *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*.
  - a. **Hints:** Richards discusses three important points in this regard – In the introduction, Richards mentions the three objectives in writing the book. First, to introduce a new kind of documentation to those who are interested in the contemporary state of culture for critics, philosophers, teachers, psychologists or those who are just curious onlookers. Second, to provide a new technique for those interested in reading poetry to decide why they should like it or not, and the third to develop better methods of critical analyses that different from the existing ones.
2. Richards analyses ten factors that lead to misreading of poems. Which are they?
  - a. **Hints:**
    - The difficulty in making out the plain sense of poetry. Many students fail to comprehend the meaning of a poem; often the feeling, tone and intention of a poem is misunderstood.
    - Likewise, words have a movement or rhythm even when read in silence. Many readers fail to capture the sensuousness inherent in poetry.
    - Imagery, especially visual imagery is difficult to interpret. Images that take shape in one mind may be different from others, but these images may not be connected to the images that existed in the poet’s mind.
    - The credible influence of irrelevant mnemonics, which is the private and personal associations, affects reading texts.
    - Stock responses based on private judgements intrude when a poem’s opinions and emotions are readily available to the reader’s mind.
    - Display of excessive emotions.
    - Inhibitions are hindrances to understand poetry.
    - Indoctrination, which is views and beliefs about the world contained in poetry, could become the foundation for confusion or unreliable judgement.
    - Technical conjectures can cause difficulty. When something has once been done in a certain manner and if it is done differently that is beyond recognition, it calls for assessing a poem from outside by technical details.
    - Lastly, the general critical preconceptions resulting from theories about its nature and value intervene between the reader and the poem.

**Answer the following questions in an essay of about 250 words**

1. Explain the major propositions in the book *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*

a. **Elaborate:** the introduction- the occasion of the book- the four parts of the book- for kinds of meaning- figurative language- use of metaphoric language- Richards' psychological approach.

**Quiz**

1. New Criticism roughly began in

- a. 1920s                      b. 1960s                      c. 1980s                      d. 2000.

2. The book written by William Empson.

a. *Concepts of Criticism* b. *A History of Literary Criticism* c. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* d. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*

3. For F.R. Leavis, the close analysis of a text is

- a. a moral activity                      b. experience                      c. scientific                      d. rational

4. The scientific use of language relies on

- a. attitude                      b. reference                      c. emotion                      d. intellect

5. What is considered as "a shift, a carrying over of a word from its normal use to a new use".

- a. irony                      b. tension                      c. ambiguity                      d. metaphor

**Glossary**

predetermined: preconceived

connotative: suggestive

**Assignment**

**I. Answer the following questions in a sentence or two.**

1. Which are the four parts of the book *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*?
2. What does Richards mention in the introduction of *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*?
3. Explain the contribution of the four kinds of meaning, according to Richards.
4. What is the contribution of William Empson?
5. Why does Richards employ the psychological approach?

**II. Answer the questions in a paragraph of 100 words**

1. Richards' doctrine in poetry

**III. Answer the following questions in an essay of about 250 words**

1. Summarise the main arguments in *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*

**Subject Expert (Official Address)**  
**Dr.C.G.Shyamala**

**Assistant Professor**

**Post-graduate Dept. of English and**

**Research Centre for Comparative Studies**

**Mercy College, Palakkad**

---