

# Literary Criticism

Literary Criticism is the overall term for studies concerned with defining, classifying, analyzing, interpreting and evaluating works of literature. Literary critics may conduct a close reading of a literary work, critique a literary work from the stance of a particular literary theory, or debate the soundness of other critics' interpretations. For a critic, no work of art is good or bad, enjoyable or unenjoyable, meaningful or meaningless unless he has subjected it to a thorough examination.

People have been telling stories and sharing responses to stories since the beginning of time. By reading and discussing literature, we expand our imagination, our sense of what is possible, and our ability to empathize with others. Reading and discussing literature can enhance our ability to write. It can sharpen our critical faculties, enabling us to assess works and better understand why literature can have such a powerful effect on our lives.

## *Introduction to Shakespearean criticism*

During his own lifetime and shortly afterwards, Shakespeare enjoyed fame and considerable critical attention. For a while, he was denigrated and, at times, only tolerated. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, D'avenant reformed Shakespeare's plays. Dryden had refined them. Nahum Tate effected some emendations. But they had all profound reverence for the favoured child of the Muses. Today idolatry and denigration alike have died away. Scholars' persistence in studying and interpreting Shakespeare for several hundreds of years has enabled us to see Shakespeare in a correct perspective.

It is assumed that the first-ever criticism Shakespeare received was from his contemporary, Robert Greene. He was university educated, and one of the popular writers in London when Shakespeare started writing. Greene in his rather notorious pamphlet alludes to Shakespeare

by calling him an 'upstart crow' who supposes that he could write as good a blank verse as him and his 'University Wits' friends. Ben Johnson, another Shakespeare's contemporary 'loved' him and honoured his memory, had granted that Shakespeare had no rivals in the writing of Comedy. He had also criticized Shakespeare for flouting the classical rules of Drama. Dryden too praised and critiqued him. Dr Johnson had showered his accolades on the bard in these words, "This, Therefore, is the praise of Shakespeare that his drama is the mirror of life". The torch of Shakespearean criticism was held high in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the likes of T.S Eliot and many others. Harold Bloom remarks, "Shakespeare is the canon. He sets the standard and the limits of literature".

No doubt, Shakespeare has received humongous accolades and a fair dose of genuine critique also. The fact that we are discussing Shakespeare in the 20<sup>th</sup> century bears testimony to his literary talent and his study of human nature. Perhaps, that's his why Ben Johnson has so prophetically remarked, "He was not of an age, but for all time!"

## *Important Concepts/Events/Terms*

**University Wits:** A group of six feisty university-educated playwrights during the last 15 years of the sixteenth century called themselves "University Wits". The group included Christopher Marlowe, Roberts Greene, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Lodge, George Peele, Thomas Kyd (Kyd wasn't university-trained though). They brought new coherence in structure and real wit and poetic power to the language.

**Comedy:** A comedy is a fictional work in which the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest and amuse us. The characters and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern. We are made to feel confident that no great disaster will occur, and usually, the action turns out happily for the chief characters. The term Comedy is customarily applied only to plays for the stage or to motion pictures and television dramas.

