

literature criticism from 1400 to 1800

literature criticism from 1400 to 1800 represents a dynamic period in the history of literary analysis, marked by significant shifts in cultural, philosophical, and artistic paradigms. This era encompasses the Renaissance's revival of classical ideals, the Baroque's intricate styles, and the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and clarity, all of which deeply influenced the way literature was both produced and critiqued. During these four centuries, criticism evolved from primarily moral and allegorical interpretations to more sophisticated frameworks considering aesthetics, genre, and authorial intent. The period saw the emergence of key critics and theorists who laid the foundations for modern literary criticism, exploring themes such as imitation, decorum, and the role of poetry and drama in society. This article will explore the major movements, critical theories, and influential figures in literature criticism from 1400 to 1800, highlighting their contributions and the broader intellectual contexts that shaped their thought. The discussion will be organized into distinct sections covering Renaissance criticism, Neoclassical principles, and Enlightenment developments, followed by an examination of notable critics and their enduring legacies.

- Renaissance Literature Criticism
- Neoclassical Literary Principles
- Enlightenment and the Evolution of Criticism
- Key Figures in Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800

Renaissance Literature Criticism

The Renaissance period, spanning roughly from the 14th to the 17th century, marked a revival of classical learning and humanism, which profoundly influenced literature criticism. This era's critics emphasized the importance of classical models, particularly those of Aristotle, Horace, and Cicero, advocating for the imitation of ancient texts as a means to achieve literary excellence. The renewed focus on human experience, individual creativity, and the moral purpose of literature shaped critical discourse during this time.

Humanism and Classical Influence

Humanism played a central role in shaping Renaissance literature criticism, encouraging a return to Greco-Roman texts and ideals. Critics believed that studying ancient authors provided a standard against which contemporary works could be measured. The revival of Aristotle's "Poetics" introduced concepts like mimesis (imitation) and catharsis, which became foundational to evaluating drama and poetry. This classical influence led to a critical framework valuing balance, harmony, and decorum in literary works.

Poetry and Moral Purpose

Renaissance critics often viewed literature as a vehicle for moral instruction and ethical reflection. Poets and playwrights were expected not only to delight audiences but also to educate them, aligning with the Aristotelian idea that literature should combine pleasure with utility. This dual purpose was central to the criticism of poetry and drama, which emphasized clarity, propriety, and the promotion of virtuous behavior.

Notable Renaissance Criticism Concepts

- **Imitatio:** The practice of emulating classical authors to create new works of enduring value.
- **Decorum:** The suitability of style and subject matter to the audience and genre.
- **Unity of Time, Place, and Action:** Principles derived from Aristotle's "Poetics" that dictated the structure of dramatic works.
- **Verisimilitude:** The appearance of truth, ensuring that literary works were believable and coherent.

Neoclassical Literary Principles

The 17th and 18th centuries witnessed the rise of Neoclassicism, a movement characterized by a strict adherence to order, rationality, and classical ideals in literature. Neoclassical criticism sought to establish universal rules governing literary creation and judgment, emphasizing reason, clarity, and decorum. This period was marked by the codification of literary genres and the belief that literature should reflect society's values and promote moral improvement.

Rules and Rationality

Neoclassical critics endorsed the idea that literature must conform to established rules derived from classical texts. These rules governed aspects such as plot construction, character development, and poetic diction. Rationality was prized above emotional excess, leading critics to favor works that exhibited balance, restraint, and intellectual clarity. The emphasis on rules also extended to the classification of genres, with strict boundaries drawn between tragedy, comedy, and epic poetry.

Genre and Literary Hierarchy

During the Neoclassical era, literature was organized into a hierarchical structure based on genre, each with specific conventions and purposes. Tragedy was considered the highest form of drama, followed by comedy and other poetic forms. Critics insisted on maintaining the purity of genres to preserve artistic integrity. This codification influenced both the creation and evaluation of literary works.

Key Neoclassical Concepts

- **Verisimilitude:** Continued emphasis on realism and believability in literature.
- **Decorum:** Strict adherence to appropriateness in style, subject, and tone.
- **Didacticism:** The belief that literature should instruct and improve the reader.
- **Imitation:** Adaptation of classical models with innovation limited by decorum and rationality.

Enlightenment and the Evolution of Criticism

The Enlightenment era brought a new intellectual vigor to literature criticism from 1400 to 1800, emphasizing reason, scientific inquiry, and the rights of individuals. Critics during this period expanded literary evaluation beyond classical imitation to include considerations of originality, creativity, and emotional impact. The rise of periodicals and public literary debates contributed to a more democratic and diverse critical landscape.

Reason and Literary Analysis

Enlightenment critics championed reason as the primary tool for analyzing literature, advocating for clear, logical, and objective criticism. They sought to understand the social functions of literature and its capacity to influence public opinion and morality. This period saw a growing appreciation for the novel as a literary form, reflecting the complexities of individual experience in a changing society.

Emergence of Aesthetic Theory

During the Enlightenment, aesthetic theory gained prominence, exploring the nature of beauty and the emotional responses elicited by literature. Critics began to investigate how form, style, and content work together to produce artistic effects, moving beyond purely moral or didactic evaluations. This shift laid groundwork for later Romantic and modern literary theories.

Public Criticism and Literary Journals

The proliferation of literary journals and periodicals in the 18th century democratized literature criticism, allowing a broader audience to engage with critical discourse. Public debates and reviews became important venues for shaping literary reputations and tastes. This development fostered a more interactive and evolving critical environment.

Key Figures in Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800

Several influential critics and theorists shaped the trajectory of literature criticism during this period, each contributing unique perspectives and methodologies that continue to inform modern literary studies.

Sir Philip Sidney

Sidney was a seminal Renaissance critic whose work "The Defence of Poesy" articulated the value of poetry as both imaginative and moral. He championed the creative power of the poet and argued for poetry's superiority in teaching and delighting readers simultaneously.

Boileau and the French Neoclassicism

Nicolas Boileau was a leading figure in French Neoclassical criticism, codifying the principles of order, clarity, and decorum. His treatise "Art Poétique" became a foundational text for understanding literary rules and the role of criticism in maintaining artistic standards.

Alexander Pope

Alexander Pope, a prominent English poet and critic, combined wit with rigorous critical principles in works like "An Essay on Criticism." He emphasized the importance of nature, reason, and the classical tradition in evaluating poetry and advocated for balanced judgment.

Denis Diderot

Diderot was a central Enlightenment critic and philosopher who expanded criticism to include considerations of originality and emotional depth. His work on drama and aesthetics helped shape the development of modern critical thought, emphasizing the interplay between art and society.

Summary of Influential Critics

1. Sir Philip Sidney – Renaissance humanism and poetic defense
2. Nicolas Boileau – Neoclassical rules and poetic order
3. Alexander Pope – Balance, nature, and classical emulation
4. Denis Diderot – Enlightenment aesthetics and originality

Frequently Asked Questions

What were the main characteristics of literature criticism between 1400 and 1800?

Literature criticism from 1400 to 1800 was characterized by a strong emphasis on classical texts, the use of rhetorical and philosophical frameworks, and the gradual development of aesthetic theories. Critics often focused on moral and didactic purposes of literature, adhering to principles derived from Aristotle and Horace, and later incorporating Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment rationalism.

Who were some influential literary critics during the Renaissance period?

Influential literary critics during the Renaissance included Baldassare Castiglione, who emphasized the role of the ideal courtier; Philip Sidney, known for his work 'An Apology for Poetry'; and Sir Thomas Wyatt, who introduced Petrarchan forms to English literature. Their criticism often blended classical ideals with contemporary cultural and artistic concerns.

How did Renaissance humanism impact literature criticism from 1400 to 1600?

Renaissance humanism revived interest in classical antiquity, encouraging critics to study ancient texts closely and apply classical standards to contemporary literature. This led to a focus on the moral and educational functions of literature, the importance of eloquence and style, and a belief in literature's power to shape virtuous citizens.

What role did Aristotle's 'Poetics' play in literary criticism during the 17th and 18th centuries?

Aristotle's 'Poetics' was foundational for literary criticism between the 17th and 18th centuries. Critics used its principles on tragedy, plot, catharsis, and imitation to evaluate literary works. The neoclassical critics particularly emphasized Aristotle's ideas on unity of time, place, and action, and on decorum and genre distinctions.

How did neoclassicism influence literary criticism in the 17th and 18th centuries?

Neoclassicism emphasized order, reason, and restraint, drawing inspiration from classical antiquity. Literary criticism in this period stressed adherence to rules and decorum, the importance of clarity and balance, and the moral purpose of literature. Critics like Nicolas Boileau and Alexander Pope championed these ideals, promoting literature as a vehicle for instructing and delighting readers.

What was the significance of Samuel Johnson's contributions to literary criticism?

Samuel Johnson was a key figure in 18th-century literary criticism, known for his 'Preface to

Shakespeare' and 'Lives of the Poets.' He advocated for a moral and practical approach to literature, valued Shakespeare's natural characterization despite his breaking of classical unities, and emphasized the importance of understanding authors within their historical context.

How did Enlightenment ideals shape literary criticism during the 18th century?

Enlightenment ideals shaped literary criticism by promoting reason, empirical observation, and skepticism of traditional authority. Critics evaluated literature based on its ability to instruct, promote virtue, and reflect human nature. There was also an increased interest in audience reception and the social functions of literature, as seen in the works of critics like Denis Diderot and Voltaire.

In what ways did early modern literary criticism lay the groundwork for later Romantic criticism?

Early modern literary criticism laid groundwork for Romanticism by engaging with ideas about individual creativity, the emotional impact of literature, and the limitations of rigid classical rules. While neoclassical critics emphasized form and reason, dissenting voices began to highlight imagination and expression, setting the stage for the Romantic celebration of originality and subjectivity.

Additional Resources

1. Poetics by Aristotle

Aristotle's "Poetics" remains one of the earliest and most influential works of literary criticism. Written in the 4th century BCE but profoundly impacting criticism well into the 1400-1800 period, it analyzes the principles of tragedy and epic poetry. The text outlines key concepts like mimesis (imitation), catharsis, and the elements of plot, character, and spectacle. Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers often revisited Aristotle's ideas to shape their own literary theories.

2. The Defense of Poesy by Sir Philip Sidney (1595)

This seminal work is one of the first major English defenses of poetry as a noble art form. Sidney argues that poetry blends philosophy and history, serving both to delight and instruct readers. Written during the Elizabethan era, it advocates for the moral and imaginative power of poetry, countering contemporary criticisms of poetic fiction. The treatise helped elevate the status of poetry in English literature.

3. Essay Concerning Human Understanding by John Locke (1689)

Although primarily a philosophical work, Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" had significant implications for literary theory and criticism. It explores the nature of human knowledge, perception, and language, influencing how critics considered interpretation and meaning in texts. Locke's emphasis on experience and empirical evidence encouraged more analytical approaches to literature in the Enlightenment era.

4. Observations on the Art of Poetry by Alexander Pope (1735)

Alexander Pope's "Observations on the Art of Poetry" critiques contemporary poetic practices and discusses the principles of good poetry. In this work, Pope champions classical poetic form, clarity, and decorum, reflecting neoclassical ideals. His insights on wit, harmony, and poetic imitation

influenced 18th-century literary standards and debates about innovation versus tradition.

5. *Critique of Pure Reason by Immanuel Kant (1781)*

While primarily philosophical, Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" profoundly influenced literary criticism by examining how humans perceive and understand reality. His ideas about the limits of knowledge and the role of imagination and reason helped shape Romantic and later literary theories. Critics used Kantian concepts to explore the relationship between art, cognition, and aesthetics.

6. *Preface to Lyrical Ballads by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1800)*

Though slightly outside the 1800 cutoff, the "Preface" is crucial for understanding late 18th-century literary criticism. Wordsworth articulates a new poetic philosophy emphasizing natural language, emotion, and the ordinary experiences of life. The preface challenges neoclassical rules and champions the imagination, marking a shift toward Romanticism in literary taste and critical thought.

7. *Of the Standard of Taste by David Hume (1757)*

In this essay, Hume investigates the nature of aesthetic judgment and why people differ in their tastes. He argues for the existence of certain standards in art criticism based on qualities like delicacy of taste and practice. Hume's work laid the groundwork for Enlightenment discussions on subjectivity and objectivity in evaluating literature and art.

8. *On the Sublime by Longinus (translated and influential in the Renaissance)*

Originally an ancient Greek treatise, "On the Sublime" was rediscovered and translated during the Renaissance, deeply impacting literature criticism from 1400 onwards. It explores the concept of the sublime as a source of elevated and powerful artistic expression. The treatise influenced Renaissance and Baroque writers and critics in understanding emotional and rhetorical effects in literature.

9. *The Art of Poetry by Horace (Ars Poetica, influential in 1400-1800)*

Horace's "Ars Poetica," written in the 1st century BCE, became a foundational text for neoclassical literary criticism during the Renaissance and beyond. It offers practical advice on poetic composition, emphasizing unity, decorum, and the importance of pleasing the audience. Its maxims shaped the standards and expectations of poetry and drama throughout the early modern period.

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