

Banha University - Faculty of Arts
English Department
First Year Students

Introduction to Criticism
Lecture 8

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A Brief Introduction to Western Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present

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- •Greek and Roman
- •Middle Ages
- •The Renaissance

- •Enlightenment
- •Romanticism
- •Victorian
- •Modern Age

BEGINNINGS: THE GREEKS AND ROMANS (c. 450 B.C.- A.D. 400)

- Greek literature begins with two masterpieces the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which were created by Homer.
- As a result of the political and economical development and the great literary achievements in poetry and drama, the ancient Greek literary criticism prospered.
- The greatest Ancient literary critics are Plato and Aristotle, who opened the history of Western literary criticism.

THE MIDDLE AGES (c. A.D. 400-1500)

- The period of the Middle Ages encompasses a thousand years of European history, distinguished by the Christian religion.
- During the Medieval times, there was no central government to keep the order. The only organization that seemed to unite Europe was the Christian Church.
- Christianity took the lead in politics, law, art and learning for hundreds of years. Religion shaped people's lives.

THE RENAISSANCE (c. 1500-1660)

- Against the theology of the Middle Ages arose the intellectual movement, Renaissance, which sprang first in Italy in the fourteenth century and gradually spread all over Europe.
- The movement had two striking features. One was the thirsting curiosity for classical literature, and the other was the keen interest in human beauty and human activities, which is in sharp contrast with Medieval theology.

THE RENAISSANCE

- Renaissance marks the transition from the medieval to the modern world. It resulted from many new facts and forces arising within the old order of the Medieval Period:
- •Hellenistic spirit—human beings are glorious creatures capable of individual development (perfection)
- •The Protestant Reformation
- •The introduction of printing, which led to a commercial market for literature
- •The great economic and political changes leading to the rise of democracy
- • The encouragement of the growing new science

THE RENAISSANCE

- Sir Philip Sidney's (1554-1586) *The Defense of Poesy* (c. 1580) is usually considered the most important work of literary criticism from this period. In his *Defense* Sidney argues that poetry must serve not simply to give pleasure, but also to contribute positively to the life of society. Unlike the writers of medieval allegories, however, Sidney believed that literature could—and should—have a moral impact without being didactic or prescriptive.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT (1660-1798)

- The Enlightenment, a period of neoclassicism is characterized by a revitalized interest in the values and ideas of the classical world, particularly of the Romans.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT (1660-1798)

- Classicism places emphasis upon the qualities of the classical literature:
- •Rationalism---elegant and well-proportioned form, precise idea, true-to-life description and standardized language.
- •Restraint of emotion and passion

THE ENLIGHTENMENT (1660-1798)

- •An ability to think logically and to communicate objectively rather than subjectively.
- •Follow the fixed laws and rules drawn from Greek and Latin works.
- These qualities are apparent in the words of John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson , the greatest English critics of Neoclassicism.

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD (1798- 1837)

- As a reaction to the restraints and rules imposed by Neoclassicists, Romanticism came into being in the late 18th century.
- Romanticism is a bourgeois literary movement and its emergence was closely connected with the French Revolution, the European national liberation movement and the Industrial Revolution

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

- Characteristics:
- •Romanticists were discontented with and opposed to the development of capitalism. They tried to idealize the life of a non-capitalist society and thus laid emphasis on subjective idealism and emotional expression.
- •Romanticists had a persistent interest in the medieval literature, such as epics, ballads, which were not restricted by various kinds of classical rules and were characterized by rich imagination, strong emotion and free expression.

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

- Romanticists showed a profound admiration and love for nature.
- Romanticists were full of moral enthusiasm, believing in idealism.
- Romanticists took interest in the strange and the mysterious as opposed to common sense.
- The leading Romantic writers include Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats in England.

THE VICTORIAN PERIOD (1837-1901)

- It rose as a reaction against the the sentimentality of Romanticism.
- During the Victorian era rapid industrialization, poverty, population growth, and mass transportation contributed to a general sense that the world was changing rapidly, and people had difficulty coping with these changes.

THE MODERN PERIOD (1901- Present)

- Modernism was a complex and diverse international literary movement, originating at about the end of the 19th century and reaching its maturity in the mid 20th

THE MODERN PERIOD

The dominant critical views can be divided into three groupings:



formal, those concerned with the structure or form of texts (formalism, structuralism, deconstruction);



social, those concerned with texts in relation to social contexts (new historicism, feminism, Marxism);



personal, those concerned with the interaction of the individual (author or reader) and texts (reader-response criticism, psychoanalytic criticism).