Literary Criticism and Theory

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Prepared for Maggie Enow's school of English Modern Letters.

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Chapter 1: What Criticism Is — Reading, Judging, and Explaining

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

1. Explain in plain words what literary criticism does, and how it differs from simply liking or disliking a book.
2. Distinguish between a summary, an opinion, and a critical argument.
3. Name the three basic critical questions — what does it say, how does it work, and why does it matter — and apply them to a short passage.
4. Identify evidence in a text that can support a critical claim.

1.1 A First Definition

Every reader judges. You finish a poem and think, that was beautiful. You close a novel and think, that ending was weak. Criticism begins at that moment, but it does not end there. Criticism is the disciplined attempt to explain *why* you judged as you did, using evidence from the work itself, in language that another reader can test.

Think of three levels of response.

First, **impression**: "I liked it." This is honest, but it tells another reader almost nothing.

Second, **description**: "The poem uses images of rain in every stanza, and the last line repeats the first." This can be checked. Anyone can open the poem and count.

Third, **interpretation and judgement**: "Because the rain images grow heavier as the poem proceeds, and because the final line returns to the opening, the poem presents grief not as a single blow but as a cycle the speaker cannot leave — and that structure is the source of its power." This is a critical claim. It can be argued with, supported, or challenged. That is exactly what makes it criticism.

Good criticism therefore has three habits: it looks closely, it gives reasons, and it stays answerable to the text. If a claim cannot be tested against the words on the page, it is not yet criticism — it is only talk about a book.

1.2 Criticism Is Not a Hunt for Faults

In everyday speech, to criticise means to find fault. In literary study the word is wider and older. It comes from a Greek word meaning to judge or to distinguish. A critic distinguishes: this image from that one, this effect from that cause, a successful passage from a passage that merely tries to succeed. Praise, when it is reasoned, is criticism just as much as blame.

This matters for your own writing. A student essay that only lists faults will sound thin. A student essay that only praises will sound empty. The strong essay weighs: it shows where a work succeeds, where it strains, and why both facts matter for the meaning of the whole.

1.3 The Three Questions

Whenever you meet a new text, ask three questions in order.

What does it say? Establish the literal sense first. Who speaks? What happens? What is stated, and what is only implied? Many weak essays fail here: they build large theories on a passage they have not yet understood at the plain level.

How does it work? Study the means: word choice, image, rhythm, structure, point of view, irony, repetition. Literature does not deliver meaning in a plain parcel. Form is part of meaning.

Why does it matter? Connect the work to larger questions: human experience, the society that produced it, the tradition it joins or resists, and the reader it addresses. This third question is the most exciting and the most dangerous, because it is the easiest to answer without evidence. Always drag it back to questions one and two.

1.4 Worked Example: Three Levels on One Passage

Consider this short original passage, written for this book:

> "She kept his cup on the table long after the house had learned to eat without him. In the morning she washed it with the others. At night she set it down again, empty, in its place."

At the level of *what it says*: a woman keeps a dead or absent man's cup in use as a place-setting. She washes it daily and replaces it nightly.

At the level of *how it works*: notice the verbs. "Kept," "washed," "set" — ordinary household actions, repeated. The house itself "had learned" — the building is given a human capacity, which quietly shows how long the absence has lasted. The word "empty" is delayed until near the end of its sentence, so the reader feels the hollowness at the last moment.

At the level of *why it matters*: the passage suggests that grief, in ordinary life, is not always weeping. It can be housekeeping continued past its purpose — love expressed as routine that refuses to update itself. A critic could now argue whether this restraint is moving or too quiet, but the argument would be grounded in observable choices.

That movement — observe, describe the means, then interpret — is the basic movement of every chapter that follows.

1.5 A Short History in One Paragraph

Criticism is as old as literature's public life. In ancient Greece, Plato worried that poetry told lies about the gods and stirred dangerous emotions; Aristotle answered by studying how tragedy actually works. Roman writers adapted Greek ideas for rhetoric and public speech. Medieval commentators read texts for moral and spiritual senses. The Renaissance recovered classical models and argued about rules. The eighteenth century prized reason, clarity, and shared standards of taste. The Romantic period shifted attention to feeling, imagination, and the individual mind. The nineteenth century connected literature to history and society. The twentieth century multiplied approaches — some turned inward to the text alone, others outward to psychology, politics, gender, empire, and language itself. This book follows that path in a simplified order, not because later means better, but because each generation's questions become clearer when you see what they were answering.

Exercises — Chapter 1

Exercise 1. Classify each sentence as impression, description, or critical claim: (a) "This novel is boring." (b) "The novel repeats the same train journey in chapters two, seven, and eleven." (c) "By repeating the journey with small changes, the novel shows a character who travels constantly but never arrives anywhere in his life."

Exercise 2. Take any short poem you know. Write one sentence for each of the three questions: what it says, how it works, why it matters.

Exercise 3. Explain, in about one hundred words, why "I did not like it" is a starting point for criticism but not yet criticism itself.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 1

5. (a) is an impression: no reason is given. (b) is description: it can be verified by checking the chapters. (c) is a critical claim: it interprets the described pattern and can be debated.
6. A good answer keeps the levels separate. If your "how it works" sentence only retells the story, rewrite it to name a device — an image, a rhythm, a repeated word, a shift in voice.
7. Strong answers mention evidence and other readers: a private feeling becomes criticism when it is explained with reasons drawn from the text, so that someone who felt differently can follow the argument and answer it.

Chapter 2: The Classical Foundations — Aristotle, Imitation, and Catharsis

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

8. Explain Aristotle's idea of imitation (mimesis) in your own words.
9. Describe the parts of a tragedy as Aristotle presents them, especially plot, character, and reversal.
10. Explain two common interpretations of catharsis and say why the term remains debated.
11. Apply Aristotle's test — unity of action — to a play or story you know.

2.1 Why Begin with Aristotle?

Aristotle's *Poetics*, written in the fourth century BCE, is a short, dense, unfinished-looking work of lecture notes. Yet for more than two thousand years, critics have argued with it, borrowed from it, and defined themselves against it. The reason is simple: Aristotle was the first critic in the European tradition to treat a literary form — tragedy — as something with a structure that could be studied, rather than merely praised, blamed, or used as a moral lesson.

His method matters as much as his conclusions. He observed many plays, compared them, and asked what the successful ones shared. Criticism, in his hands, is empirical before it is prescriptive: first look at what works, then state the pattern.

2.2 Imitation

Aristotle holds that poetry is a form of imitation — in Greek, *mimesis*. This word is often misunderstood. Imitation does not mean copying a real event like a photocopy. It means representing human action in a shaped form. A tragedy does not reproduce a day in a king's life minute by minute; it selects, orders, and heightens actions so that their pattern becomes visible.

In the public-domain translation by S. H. Butcher, Aristotle writes:

> "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."

Source: Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by S. H. Butcher (public-domain translation, first published in the nineteenth century). The passage is quoted briefly for study.

Unpack the definition slowly. An *action*, not a person, is the centre. The action must be *serious* — it carries weight. It must be *complete* — it has a beginning, a middle, and an end that belong together. It must have *magnitude* — enough scale for its changes to matter. And it works *through pity and fear*: we pity a suffering we feel is undeserved, or greater than we could bear, and we fear because the sufferer is enough like us for the suffering to be imaginable as our own.

2.3 Plot First

The most famous and most surprising claim in the *Poetics* is that plot — *mythos*, the arrangement of incidents — is the most important element of tragedy, more important than character. Aristotle's reasoning is practical. A play can move an audience with a well-built sequence of events even when its characters are simply drawn; but the most beautifully drawn character, placed in a shapeless sequence of episodes, will not produce tragedy's effect.

A good plot, for Aristotle, has unity. Each incident follows from the previous one by probability or necessity, and removing any incident would disturb the whole. Episodes strung together merely because they happened to the same person — first he went to war, then he bought a horse, then he visited a cousin — do not make a unified plot unless the connections are causal.

Within a unified plot, two devices give tragedy its special power. **Reversal** (*peripeteia*) is a turn in which an action produces the opposite of its intended effect: the messenger who comes to comfort ends up revealing the terrible truth. **Recognition** (*anagnorisis*) is a change from ignorance to knowledge: a character learns who someone truly is, or what he himself has truly done. The strongest tragedies, Aristotle argues, bring reversal and recognition together, so that the moment of discovery is also the moment of ruin or rescue.

2.4 Catharsis — A Debated Word

Aristotle says tragedy effects a *catharsis* of pity and fear. The Greek word can suggest medical purging, ritual purification, or clarification, and scholars have argued for centuries about which sense Aristotle intended. Two readings remain useful for students.

On the **purging reading**, the emotions are aroused in the theatre so that they can be released in a safe, ordered form. We leave calmer than we came, having felt intensely without real danger.

On the **clarification reading**, the experience teaches us what pity and fear truly attach to. By watching a structured action, we learn to feel these emotions more intelligently — toward the right objects, in the right measure.

You need not settle the debate to use the idea. In your essays, state which reading you are using, and show how the play you discuss arouses and orders these emotions. A vague use of "catharsis" to mean "any strong feeling" weakens an argument; a precise use strengthens it.

2.5 Worked Example: Testing Unity

Imagine a short story in outline: a fisherman ignores warnings and sails into a storm (cause); his boat is damaged (consequence); he signals for help, and the rescue boat is captained by the brother he quarrelled with and refused to help the previous winter (reversal with recognition — he recognises both his brother's generosity and his own fault); he survives, changed. Every incident is needed. Remove the quarrel, and the rescue loses its meaning. Remove the ignored warning, and the storm is mere bad luck, arousing less pity and fear because nothing in the man's choices led to it.

Contrast an episodic version: the fisherman sails, meets a storm, then meets pirates, then finds treasure, then comes home. Events abound, but nothing causes anything else. Aristotle would call this the weaker plot — not because it is dull, but because its pleasures are separate, not cumulative.

Exercises — Chapter 2

Exercise 1. Define mimesis in your own words, and give one example of how a play imitates without copying.

Exercise 2. Choose a play, film, or novel you know well. Identify one reversal and one recognition in it. If you cannot find one of them, say what effect its absence has.

Exercise 3. A friend says, "Character is everything; plot is just what happens." Write a short paragraph answering from Aristotle's point of view, then add one sentence of your own agreement or disagreement.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 2

12. Mimesis is representation of human action in a selected, ordered form. Example: a dramatist compresses a long feud into three scenes that show its cause, crisis, and consequence — nothing is copied exactly, yet the pattern of feuding is truly shown.
13. Credit any correctly identified turn where intention produces its opposite (reversal) and any discovery that changes ignorance to knowledge (recognition). If one is absent, note for example that suspense may remain but the special tragic shock of discovery is lost.

14. From Aristotle: plot is first because tragedy's effect depends on the arrangement of incidents; character is revealed through action and choice within that arrangement. Your own sentence should take a position — for instance, that modern novels may reverse the priority while drama keeps Aristotle's.

Chapter 3: From Rules to Feeling — Johnson, Wordsworth's Circle, and Coleridge

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

15. Summarise Samuel Johnson's common-sense test of literature and his defence of Shakespeare against rigid rules.
16. Explain why the Romantic generation shifted attention from rules to imagination and feeling.
17. Distinguish Coleridge's fancy from imagination in your own words.
18. Quote and comment on a short public-domain passage from Johnson and from Coleridge.

3.1 Johnson and the Test of Time

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) wrote criticism as a working author who had compiled a dictionary, edited Shakespeare, and reviewed the lives of the English poets. His manner is famously direct. Where earlier critics sometimes treated classical rules — such as the dramatic unities of time, place, and action — as laws, Johnson asked a plainer question: does the work please and instruct real readers over a long period?

In his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765), Johnson defends Shakespeare against the charge that his plays break the unities. His argument is that the audience always knows it is in a theatre; no one truly believes that the stage is Alexandria in one scene and Rome in the next, so no deception is broken when the place changes. The often-quoted line of his test of value is short. Johnson writes of a work that has long survived:

> "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature."

Source: Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765), public domain.

"General nature" does not mean dull generality. It means human nature as widely shared: ambition, jealousy, grief, and love as people across ages recognise them. For Johnson, Shakespeare endures because his characters speak and act as human beings generally do, not merely as courtiers of one decade did. A fashionable novelty may please many for a season; only fidelity to general nature pleases long.

Johnson is equally useful on the purpose of writing. In his criticism he returns to the idea that the writer's end is to enable readers "better to enjoy life, or better to endure it." Keep that sentence in mind whenever an essay of yours needs a standard: does this work sharpen enjoyment, strengthen endurance, or both — and can you show where?

3.2 The Romantic Turn

At the end of the eighteenth century, younger poets and critics grew impatient with inherited rules and polished poetic diction — the stock phrases that poetry had accumulated like furniture. The Romantic turn, associated in England with William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and their *Lyrical Ballads* (1798, with Wordsworth's famous Preface added in 1800 and expanded in 1802), proposed that poetry should draw its language closer to real speech and its subjects closer to common life, and that feeling was not decoration on thought but a mode of knowledge itself.

For the student of criticism, the key shift is one of location. Augustan criticism asks chiefly: does the work obey the best models and please instructed taste? Romantic criticism asks also: what happened in the mind that made this? What does the work reveal about perception, memory, and imagination? Neither set of questions cancels the other. Modern criticism still uses both — but you should know which set you are using in any given essay, and why.

3.3 Coleridge: Fancy and Imagination

Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) is part autobiography, part philosophy, part criticism. Its most taught distinction separates **fancy** from **imagination**.

Fancy, in Coleridge's account, is a combining power that works with fixed materials: it gathers images that already exist and sets them side by side in new arrangements, as a collage is made from cut-out pictures. The materials do not change their nature by being combined.

Imagination is a shaping power. Coleridge calls the primary imagination the living power by which the mind perceives the world at all — not passively receiving impressions but actively forming them into a coherent scene. The secondary imagination is the artistic echo of that power: it "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create." The artist breaks down familiar perceptions and remakes them into a new unity in which the parts are transformed, not merely rearranged.

Coleridge's best-known sentence on the subject is brief:

> "Imagination is the shaping spirit."

The fuller passage in Chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria* (1817, public domain) develops this shaping-spirit idea at length; read it in the original when you can. For examination purposes, hold the contrast plainly: fancy assembles, imagination transforms. A poem that lists beautiful things may show fancy. A poem in which a landscape becomes, indivisibly, the state of a soul — so that you cannot separate the description from the feeling — shows imagination in Coleridge's sense.

Coleridge also gives us a phrase every student should own: the "willing suspension of disbelief." When we read of ghosts or impossible voyages, we do not believe them as fact, nor do we merely pretend. We willingly hold back our disbelief so that the work's human truth can reach us. Criticism can then ask: does the work earn that suspension? Does it stay faithful to the emotional logic it has set up, even inside an impossible premise?

3.4 Worked Example: Applying Both Critics to One Poem

Take an imaginary short poem: an old lighthouse keeper speaks on his last night of work, watching a storm. A Johnsonian reading asks: is the keeper a just representation of general nature? Do his pride in his work, his fear of uselessness, and his stubborn care for strangers at sea ring true for readers far from any coast? Has the poem the kind of truth that could please long?

A Coleridgean reading asks a different question: does the storm remain weather, listed and decorated — fancy's work — or is it dissolved and re-created until storm, lamp, and keeper's mind form one shaping vision? Does the reader willingly suspend disbelief in the speaking lamp or the answering sea, if the poem uses them, because the emotional logic holds?

Neither reading is complete alone. Together they model what mature criticism does: it keeps more than one standard in play and says explicitly which standard supports which judgement.

Exercises — Chapter 3

Exercise 1. State Johnson's test of literary value in your own words, and name one work you believe passes it. Give your reason.

Exercise 2. A poem describes a market by listing twenty colourful stalls in lively language, but the stalls never combine into any larger impression. In Coleridge's terms, is this fancy or imagination at work? Justify your answer.

Exercise 3. Explain "willing suspension of disbelief" using an example from a story with an impossible element.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 3

19. Johnson's test: a work that pleases many readers over a long time does so because it represents general human nature justly. Any enduring, widely recognised work can serve as your example, provided your reason names a shared human truth it represents — not merely its fame.
20. Fancy. The materials are vivid but only assembled; they are not dissolved and re-created into a transformed unity. If your chosen example does fuse its images into a

single governing impression, argue imagination instead — the justification matters more than the label.

21. Strong answers show a reader who neither believes the impossibility literally nor dismisses the work, but accepts its premise provisionally so its human meaning can operate — for example, accepting a talking animal in a fable in order to receive its moral truth about pride or greed.

Chapter 4: Literature and Life — Arnold, Realism, and the Moral Question

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

22. Explain Matthew Arnold's idea of criticism as a disinterested effort to see the object as it really is.
23. Summarise Arnold's claim that literature can act as a criticism of life.
24. Discuss, with balance, whether a work's moral tendency affects its literary value.
25. Use Arnold's "touchstone" idea carefully, knowing both its use and its limit.

4.1 Arnold and Disinterestedness

Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) — poet, schools inspector, and the most influential English critic of the later nineteenth century — defined the critical effort in *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1864) as:

> "a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world."

Source: Matthew Arnold, *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1864), public domain.

"Disinterested" is easily misread. Arnold does not mean uninterested or bored. He means free from party interest: the critic should not bend judgement to serve a faction, a fashion, a market, or a personal grudge. The critic's first loyalty is to see the object clearly and to help create an atmosphere in which fresh and true ideas can circulate. For a student, the practical lesson is sharp: in an essay, your loyalty is to the text and the truth of your reading — not to the opinion you think will be rewarded, and not to the first impression you happen to have had.

4.2 Poetry as a Criticism of Life

In *The Study of Poetry* (1880), Arnold argued that as traditional certainties weakened, humanity would turn increasingly to poetry "to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us." Poetry, on this view, is itself "a criticism of life" — not a sermon, but a judgement embodied in form: by selecting and shaping experience, the poem declares what in life is weighty, what is trivial, what endures.

Arnold proposed **touchstones** as a practical aid: short passages from the greatest poets, kept in the mind, against which other poetry can be tested for its quality of thought and expression. Used humbly, touchstones train the ear. Used arrogantly, they become a

shortcut that replaces reading the work in front of you. Arnold himself warned that the test must be applied to the whole work's substance, not to isolated sparkle. In your own essays, prefer this rule: quote the passage, do the analysis, and let comparisons assist — never replace — your judgement.

4.3 The Moral Question

Does a morally troubling work lose literary value? Does a morally noble work gain it? The nineteenth century argued this intensely, partly because the novel — the era's dominant form — entered ordinary homes and was read by the young. Realist writers, in England and France alike, claimed a different duty: to represent life as it is, including its coarseness, rather than as moralists wished it to be.

Three positions are worth distinguishing, because student essays often blur them.

Position one — separation: literary value and moral value are distinct. A work can be brilliantly made and morally repellent, or clumsily made and morally admirable. Criticism should judge each axis openly and not let one disguise the other.

Position two — integration: in literature, form and moral vision cannot finally be separated, because the way a work makes us see is itself a moral act. A novel that trains sympathy widens the reader; a work that trains contempt narrows the reader, and that is a literary failure too, since the work's seeing is false or partial.

Position three — consequence: whatever we conclude about value, works have effects, and criticism may legitimately study them — who is dignified, who is mocked, whose suffering is shown as real.

A strong essay does not need to adopt one position for all cases. It needs to know which position it is using on this occasion, and to argue it from this text.

4.4 Worked Example: Two Readings of a Cruel Scene

Imagine a chapter in which a wealthy merchant humiliates a poor debtor before a crowd, and the narration lingers on the crowd's laughter. A separation reading might say: the scene is superbly constructed — the dialogue is exact, the pacing builds dread — and its cruelty is the merchant's, not the book's; the book exposes him.

An integration reading might answer: watch the narration, not only the merchant. Does the prose invite us to laugh with the crowd, or does it make the laughter ugly to hear? If the sentences give the debtor no inner life while decorating the merchant's wit, the work's own seeing is implicated.

Notice that both readings return to the same evidence — narration, point of view, distribution of inner life — and differ in the conclusion they draw from it. That is a real

critical disagreement, and it can be conducted honourably on both sides. That is also why evidence matters more than slogans in this area.

Exercises — Chapter 4

Exercise 1. Explain "disinterested" in Arnold's sense, and give one example of interested criticism he would disapprove of.

Exercise 2. Choose a poem you admire and describe, in a paragraph, how it acts as a criticism of life: what does its shaping of experience declare to be weighty or trivial?

Exercise 3. State which of the three positions on the moral question you find most convincing, and defend it in about one hundred and fifty words against the strongest objection.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 4

26. Disinterested means free from party, market, or personal interest — loyal to seeing the object as it is. Example of interested criticism: praising a book because its author belongs to your group, or condemning it unread because its author opposes your views.
27. Credit answers that point to selection and emphasis in the poem — what it dwells on, what it passes over, what its ending affirms — rather than answers that merely restate the poem's topic.
28. There is no single correct position. Marks of strength: the objection is stated fairly (not as a caricature), and the defence answers it with a textual example, not only with a principle.

Chapter 5: The Work Itself — Formalism and Close Reading

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

29. Explain what formalist and New Critical approaches attend to, and what they deliberately set aside.
30. Perform a close reading: attending to diction, image, sound, structure, and tension in a short passage.
31. Use the concepts of paradox, irony, and tension as analytical tools rather than decorative labels.
32. State the classic objection to formalism — and a fair reply to it.

5.1 Turning Inward

In the early and middle twentieth century, several movements — Russian Formalism in the nineteen-tens and twenties, and the American and English New Criticism in the thirties to fifties — argued that criticism had become too much about everything except the work: the author's life, the author's intentions, the history of the period, the reader's feelings. Their corrective was severe and fruitful: treat the literary work as an object made of language, whose meaning is achieved by its internal relations, and learn to describe those relations precisely.

Two warnings from this tradition remain standard teaching, expressed here in our own words. First, the meaning of a work is not identical with a statement of what the author intended to say; authors can fail, exceed, or misunderstand their own achievement, and the work, once public, must stand on what it actually does. Second, a poem is not validated by the emotion it reports in a reader; "I wept" is a fact about the reader, not yet a fact about the work. The critic's task is to find, in the work, the structures that could account for the effect.

These warnings are tools, not commandments. Later chapters show approaches that restore history and the reader. But no student who has learned close reading ever unlearns it, because every other approach still needs evidence, and evidence lives in the words.

5.2 The Close Reading Method

Work in passes.

First pass — the words. Note diction: which words are plain, which elevated, which drawn from a particular world — farming, law, the sea, the market, scripture. Note words that repeat, and words that clash.

Second pass — the images and sounds. Follow the imagery: is there a governing image, a pattern, a turn? Listen to sound: rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, pauses. In prose, sentence length and cadence do similar work.

Third pass — the structure. Where does the passage turn? What is placed first and last? What is withheld? How do parts qualify each other?

Fourth pass — the tensions. Formalist readers prize the places where a work holds opposed things together: statement against irony, praise against blame, order against disorder. A work that says only one simple thing usually exhausts itself quickly; a work whose meanings are held in tension rewards rereading. Paradox (an apparent contradiction that proves true), irony (meaning that runs against the surface), and ambiguity (a word or moment sustaining two or more legitimate senses) are not ornaments in this method — they are where the meaning is made.

5.3 Worked Example: A Close Reading

Read this short original poem, written for this book:

> The gate complains each time we pass,
>
> It has complained for twenty years.
>
> My father oils the hinge in spring
>
> And says, "It keeps the road in earshot."
>
> One winter it was silent.
>
> We stood in the yard, listening,
>
> Richer by one whole field of quiet,
>
> And strangely poorer.

First pass: the diction mixes the mechanical (hinge, oils) with the economic (richer, poorer) and the bodily (earshot, listening). "Complains" personifies the gate and sets a tone of affectionate grievance.

Second pass: sound is quiet and conversational; the poem's music is in its pauses. The single short sentence — "One winter it was silent" — lands like the silence it names, because every surrounding line is longer and more talkative.

Third pass: structure turns on that silent winter. Before it, complaint is habit and even a kind of company — the gate "keeps the road in earshot," connecting the yard to the world. After it, silence is described in the language of wealth, then reversed: "strangely poorer."

Fourth pass: the tension is the poem's meaning. Noise was wealth disguised as nuisance; silence is wealth experienced as loss. The paradox of the last two lines is not a trick: it states the poem's discovery that we learn the value of an irritation only when it stops — a small, exact image of how families discover the value of a difficult, present person. A formalist essay would stay with these relations and resist importing the poet's biography; whether that resistance is a strength or a limit is the question of the next section.

5.4 The Objection — and a Reply

The classic objection: a work is not a sealed object. It was written by someone, somewhere, in a language with a history, for readers with lives. To bracket all of that can make criticism ingenious and weightless — brilliant about a stanza, silent about why the stanza was needed.

The fair reply: formalism at its best never claimed that history does not exist. It claimed that history enters criticism responsibly only through the work's language, and that a student who cannot yet read a stanza closely has no business pronouncing on an empire. Sequence, not exclusion, is the defensible version: first the work, closely; then the world, carefully.

Exercises — Chapter 5

Exercise 1. Take the worked-example poem above. Find one further detail the reading did not discuss, and show how it supports or complicates the reading's conclusion.

Exercise 2. Define paradox, irony, and ambiguity, each with a one-line example you invent yourself.

Exercise 3. Write a close reading (about two hundred words) of any eight to twelve lines of verse you know, using at least three of the four passes.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 5

33. Possible details: the father speaks the poem's only direct speech, making his practical wisdom its authority; "in spring" sets the oiling in a cycle of renewal; "we stood" — the family acts together only in the silence. Any detail earns credit when its effect is shown, not merely named.
34. Paradox: "The kindest cut was the refusal." Irony: a fire station burns down — or in speech, "Splendid weather," said in a storm. Ambiguity: "She saw the crane" — bird or machine; in literature the doubleness must matter to the meaning, not merely puzzle.
35. Strong readings quote small pieces of the passage, move from observation to effect, and end with a claim about the whole. Readings that list devices without effects ("there is alliteration and a metaphor") have done the naming but not yet the criticism.

Chapter 6: Readers, History, and Society — Marxist, Feminist, and Postcolonial Approaches in Outline

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

36. Describe, in your own words and without quoting copyrighted critics, the central question each of three approaches asks: the Marxist, the feminist, and the postcolonial.
37. Explain reader-response criticism's claim that meaning is completed in reading.
38. Apply two different approaches to the same passage and show how the conclusions differ without either being careless.
39. Judge when an approach illuminates a text and when it merely uses the text as an illustration.

6.1 A Note on Method for This Chapter

The critics who founded these approaches wrote in the twentieth century, and their works remain in copyright. Accordingly, this chapter quotes none of them. It teaches their ideas in original language, as a teacher summarises a position in a lecture. That is both a legal necessity and a good discipline: if you cannot state an approach in your own words, you do not yet understand it well enough to use it.

6.2 The Marxist Question: Who Owns, Who Labours, Who Eats?

Marxist criticism begins from the claim that literature is produced inside a material world: someone owns the land, the mill, the printing press, the theatre; someone labours; the surplus goes somewhere. Its central questions of a text are therefore: What economic world does this work show, and what does it hide? Whose labour is visible and whose is invisible? Does the work present the existing order as natural and eternal, or does it expose its workings and its costs?

Key working ideas, in plain terms. **Ideology** names the set of assumptions a society treats as common sense — about property, rank, gender, merit — which literature can either reinforce or unsettle, often both at once. **Commodification** names the process by which things, people, and even art itself become items for buying and selling, valued by price rather than by use or meaning. A Marxist reading of a marriage plot, for instance, will attend to settlements, incomes, and inheritances not as background decoration but as the machinery of the plot itself: who may marry whom is decided, in part, by who owns what.

The strength of this approach is its attention to the real conditions inside fiction — the servants who make leisure possible, the colonies that make fortunes possible. Its characteristic risk is reduction: treating the work as nothing but its economics, so that a love scene becomes only a property transaction and the reading stops being surprised by the text.

6.3 The Feminist Question: Who Speaks, Who Is Seen, Who Is Silenced?

Feminist criticism, in its several generations, asks how literature represents women, how it distributes voice and agency between the sexes, and how the literary tradition itself — who was published, taught, and canonised — has been shaped by unequal access to education and print.

Its working practices include: recovering women writers whom the tradition neglected; rereading canonical works to notice what happens at their margins — the wife who speaks twice, the servant girl whose fate is a subplot's fuel; and examining the images of women a literature repeats — angel, temptress, madwoman, muse — to ask what work those images do. A feminist reading does not require a villain. Some of its finest results come from beloved books, where it shows a cost the reader had been trained not to count.

Its characteristic risk is the mirror of the Marxist one: deciding the verdict before the reading. Its safeguard is the same as every approach's safeguard — return to the text, quote it fairly, and allow it to complicate the thesis.

6.4 The Postcolonial Question: Who Describes Whom?

Postcolonial criticism studies literature written under, against, and after empire. It asks: How did imperial cultures describe the peoples they ruled — as noble, as savage, as childlike, as awaiting improvement — and how did those descriptions serve rule? How do writers from formerly colonised societies answer back: retelling the imperial story from the other side, reclaiming languages and forms, mixing the coloniser's language with local speech until it carries a different world?

Working ideas include **othering** — the making of a people into an alien "them" against which a "we" defines itself; **hybridity** — the mixed cultural forms that arise where worlds meet, neither purely one nor the other; and the **gaze** — the question of whose eyes a description is written for. A travel narrative that describes a market as chaos may be reporting, through its author's eyes, an order he could not read; postcolonial criticism teaches students to ask what the scene would look like described from inside it.

For students of English Modern Letters in Cameroon and across Africa, this approach is not an imported fashion; it is one of the instruments with which African literature in

English has been read since its beginnings, and it pairs naturally with the study of African literature elsewhere in this library.

6.5 The Reader's Share

Reader-response criticism shifts attention to the act of reading itself. Its core claim: a text is a set of instructions and invitations, but the meaning-event happens in a reader, in time — anticipating, being surprised, revising earlier judgements as later pages arrive. Two consequences follow. First, readings have a history: the same novel means differently to its first audience and to us, and both facts are data. Second, interpretation is not therefore arbitrary: readers belong to communities of interpretation — classrooms, traditions, professions — that share standards of evidence. "The text means whatever I feel" is not reader-response criticism; it is the abdication of it.

6.6 Worked Example: One Passage, Two Approaches

Recall the passage from Chapter 1: the woman who keeps her absent husband's cup on the table, washing it daily, setting it down empty each night.

A **feminist reading** notices that grief is shown as women's unpaid, repetitive household labour: the keeping of memory is work, done with the hands, daily, invisibly, folded into washing-up. It asks whether the passage honours that labour or naturalises it — whether the text sees the cost of the routine or only its beauty.

A **reader-response reading** notices its own experience: most readers report that the word "empty," arriving late in its sentence, is where the feeling strikes. The passage is engineered — or discovered — so that understanding and feeling arrive together at that word; earlier readings of the passage change once you know the word is coming, which is itself a fact about how rereading works.

Both readings are about the same sentences. Neither cancels the other. A mature essay may hold both — and say what each explains that the other cannot.

Exercises — Chapter 6

Exercise 1. For each approach in this chapter, write its central question in one sentence, from memory, in your own words.

Exercise 2. Choose a well-known story. Sketch (in bullet points) what a Marxist reading would investigate in it: the property, the labour, the hidden work.

Exercise 3. "An approach should be a lamp, not a mould." Explain this saying, with one example of a reading that used an approach as a mould.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 6

40. Marxist: how does this work represent — and reinforce or expose — the economic order and its assumptions? Feminist: how does this work distribute voice, agency, and value between women and men, and what images of women does it repeat? Postcolonial: how does this work describe coloniser and colonised, and how does it answer, resist, or reproduce imperial ways of seeing? Wording may vary; the focus must not.
41. Credit specificity: named incomes, inheritances, servants, rents, trades, or the work that produces the characters' leisure. A sketch that stays at "rich versus poor" has the topic but not yet the method.
42. A lamp illuminates features that are there; a mould forces every text into the same shape. A mould-reading example: concluding, before analysis, that a novel "exposes exploitation" and then quoting only lines that fit, ignoring the scenes that complicate the claim. The tell is that the essay could have been written without reading the book.

Chapter 7: Writing Criticism — Building an Argument About a Text

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

43. Turn a response into a thesis: a debatable claim about a text, in one or two sentences.
44. Structure a critical essay: introduction, evidence paragraphs organised by point (not by plot), and a conclusion that answers "so what?"
45. Quote correctly: introduce, quote briefly, and analyse — never let a quotation speak for itself.
46. Revise a weak paragraph into a strong one by adding evidence and analysis.

7.1 From Topic to Thesis

A topic is a territory: "grief in the poem." A thesis is a claim about that territory that a reasonable reader could dispute: "The poem presents grief not as an emotion to be expressed but as a routine to be maintained, and its power comes from the gap between the smallness of the actions and the size of the loss." The second sentence can be argued with; therefore it can be argued *for*, with evidence. That is the whole secret of the critical essay.

Test your thesis with three questions. Is it **debatable** — could an intelligent reader disagree? Is it **specific** — does it belong to this text and not to any text? Is it **provable in the space I have** — can the evidence be gathered and shown in the essay's length? If a thesis fails the first test, it is a summary. If it fails the second, it is a slogan. If it fails the third, shrink it until it passes.

7.2 The Shape of the Essay

Introduction. Open with the text and the problem, not with a generalisation about all literature since the dawn of time. State the thesis by the end of the first paragraph. A reader who knows your claim early can follow your evidence; a reader kept guessing cannot.

Body paragraphs. Organise by point, not by plot. "Then this happened, then that happened" is summary wearing an essay's clothes. Each paragraph should carry one step of the argument, open with a topic sentence that states the step, present quoted evidence, analyse it — show how the words produce the effect you claim — and connect back to the thesis. The analysis is the paragraph's centre of gravity: as a working rule, your commentary on a quotation should be at least as long as the quotation itself.

Conclusion. Do not merely repeat the thesis in new words. Answer "so what?": given that your claim is true, what do we now understand about this work, its maker, its

moment, or the experience it treats, that we did not understand before? A conclusion that enlarges is earned; a conclusion that merely stops is noticed.

7.3 Quoting Well

The pattern is: **introduce, quote, analyse.** Introduce the quotation so its place in the work is clear ("When the keeper finally speaks of the storm, she does not curse it:"). Quote briefly — the shortest passage that carries your point; long quotations are usually a sign that the analysis has not yet been done. Then analyse: pick out the operative words and show their work.

Two faults to avoid. **Dropped quotations** — a quotation inserted without introduction or comment, expected to prove the point by existing. And **quotation as summary** — quoting a passage that merely tells the same story your sentence just told. A quotation should be evidence of *how*, not a repetition of *what*.

7.4 Worked Example: Weak Paragraph, Strong Paragraph

Weak version:

> "The poem is very sad. The gate is silent in winter and the family is sad. The poet uses the word 'poorer' to show they are sad. This shows the theme of loss in the poem, which is very moving."

Every sentence is true, and the paragraph proves nothing. "Sad" is asserted three times; the one quoted word is not examined; "the theme of loss" could be said of a thousand poems.

Strong version:

> "The poem's discovery is reserved for its final reversal. Until the last lines, silence appears as gain: the family is 'richer by one whole field of quiet,' a metaphor that prices quiet like land — the one wealth a farming household measures in acres. The closing phrase, 'and strangely poorer,' cancels the account. The adverb 'strangely' matters: it records the family's own surprise at their arithmetic, and it instructs the reader to share it. What the poem knows, and says only here, is that the gate's complaint was never noise to them; it was the sound of the household's connection to the road, and its absence is a loss no quantity of quiet can repay."

The strong version has a claim (the discovery is reserved for the reversal), quoted evidence, word-level analysis ("strangely," the land metaphor), and a concluding interpretation that could be debated. Length is not the difference; attention is.

7.5 A Closing Word on Critical Honesty

Criticism is a public act. Quote accurately. Represent positions you oppose fairly — the strongest version of them, not the weakest. Distinguish what the text says from what you infer. Admit the passage that troubles your thesis and deal with it; examiners and readers trust the critic who has visibly survived the counter-evidence. The approaches in this book — classical, historical, formal, social — are instruments. The honesty with which you use them is the criticism.

Exercises — Chapter 7

Exercise 1. Turn each topic into a debatable thesis: (a) "Ambition in a tragedy you know." (b) "The ending of a novel you know."

Exercise 2. Rewrite this weak sentence into a strong analytical sentence: "The author uses a river image to show life is hard."

Exercise 3. Outline (introduction sentence, three body points, conclusion) an essay on this claim: "In the gate poem of Chapter 5, the father is the poem's true centre, although he speaks only once."

Answer Guidance — Chapter 7

47. Model for (a): "In the tragedy, ambition is shown not as a foreign invader of the hero's mind but as the exaggeration of the very quality that made him great — which is why his fall arouses pity rather than simple blame." Your (b) should likewise name a specific quality of the ending (its justice, its refusal of justice, its speed, its openness) and a consequence for the work's meaning.
48. A strong rewrite names the image's specific behaviour and effect — for example: "The river in the passage is never described as beautiful; it is a thing to be ferried, paid for, and feared in flood, so that 'life' in the narrator's world appears as a crossing that always costs and sometimes drowns." Credit any rewrite that moves from label ("a river image") to mechanism and effect.
49. A workable outline: Introduction — the poem seems to belong to the family chorus, but its one speech and one act of care belong to the father. Body: (i) his oiling of the hinge is the poem's only act of maintenance — love as upkeep; (ii) his single line supplies the poem's philosophy ("it keeps the road in earshot") — he interprets the gate for everyone; (iii) in the silent winter he does not speak, and the family's standing and listening takes place inside his absence of remedy. Conclusion — the poem's centre is the one who maintains and interprets; when maintenance fails, the family discovers what his quiet work had been holding together.

Glossary of Critical Terms

Ambiguity — A word, image, or situation sustaining two or more legitimate meanings at once, where the doubleness contributes to the work's meaning.

Anagnorisis (recognition) — In Aristotle's account of tragedy, the change from ignorance to knowledge, often coinciding with reversal.

Catharsis — Aristotle's term for the effect of tragedy on the emotions of pity and fear; interpreted variously as purging, purification, or clarification.

Close reading — Sustained attention to the language, structure, and tensions of a text as the basis of interpretation.

Disinterestedness — Arnold's term for criticism freed from party, market, and personal interest, loyal to seeing the object as it is.

Fancy — In Coleridge's distinction, the combining power that assembles ready-made images without transforming them.

Ideology — The set of assumptions a society treats as natural common sense, which literature may reinforce or unsettle.

Imagination — In Coleridge's distinction, the shaping power that dissolves and re-creates its materials into a new unity.

Irony — A mode in which meaning runs against the surface: what is said differs from what is meant, or what is intended produces its opposite.

Mimesis (imitation) — The representation of human action in a selected and ordered form; not mere copying.

Paradox — An apparent contradiction that, examined, proves true and illuminating.

Peripeteia (reversal) — In tragedy, a turn in which an action produces the opposite of its intended effect.

Thesis — The debatable central claim of a critical essay, which its evidence is organised to support.

Touchstones — Arnold's proposed short passages from the greatest poets, kept in mind as a test of quality in other poetry.

Willing suspension of disbelief — Coleridge's phrase for the reader's voluntary holding-back of disbelief, allowing a work's human truth to operate within an impossible premise.

Further Reading from Public-Domain Sources

- Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by S. H. Butcher. The foundation text of Chapter 2; read the sections on plot, reversal, and recognition first.
- Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765) and the *Lives of the Poets*. The model of common-sense criticism discussed in Chapter 3.
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), especially the chapters on fancy and imagination.
- Matthew Arnold, *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1864) and *The Study of Poetry* (1880).
- William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800, expanded 1802), for the Romantic programme in its maker's own words.

All of the above are public-domain works and can be found freely in standard digital libraries of public-domain texts. Read them slowly, in short sittings, with a pencil: criticism is learned by arguing with critics.

End of Literary Criticism and Theory — From the Library of Maggie Enow. This book is FREE. Download it freely, read it, and share it.