

Bahirji Smarak Mahavidyalaya Basmathnagar

Department of English

B.A. Third Year – Semester V

Major in English (Core)

UNDERSTANDING LITERARY CRITICISM

Course Code: HENGCT1302

Comprehensive Study Notes

Course Structure and Scheme

Teaching and Examination Scheme

Course Code	Course Name	Teaching (Hrs/Week) / Credits
HENGCT1302	Understanding Literary Criticism	04 Hrs/Week, 04 Credits

Examination Scheme

The course follows a 40% Continuous Assessment (CA) and 60% End Semester Examination (ESE) pattern.

CA	ESE	Total	Time for ESE
40	60	100	2.5 Hrs

Course Objectives (COs)

After completing this course, students will be able to:

No.	Course Objective
CO1	Understand the foundational theories of literary criticism from Plato and Aristotle.
CO2	Analyse the shift from Neoclassical principles (order, decorum, rules) to the “Battle of Tastes” between Ancients and Moderns.
CO3	Examine the core tenets of Romantic criticism (emotion, imagination, spontaneity) and contrast them with Victorian critical thought (art, morality, culture, and doubt).
CO4	Explore 20th-century critical schools, including Formalism, New Criticism, Psychoanalytic criticism, as part of the “Age of Interrogation.”
CO5	Apply key critical concepts to interpret literary texts.
CO6	Trace the historical evolution of Western literary criticism from 5th century BCE Greece to the mid-20th century.

Course Outcomes (COSs)

On successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

No.	Course Outcome	Bloom's Taxonomy Level
COS1	Differentiate between Plato's moral/philosophical objections to poetry and Aristotle's defence of poetry as a mode of knowledge.	Understand / Analyse
COS2	Explain the key debates of the Neoclassical period, including the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns.	Understand
COS3	Compare and contrast Romantic criticism with Victorian criticism in terms of their views on emotion, imagination, and the social role of art.	Analyse / Evaluate
COS4	Identify and explain major 20th-century critical approaches, including Formalism, New Criticism, and early Structuralist/Marxist thought.	Understand
COS5	Construct a coherent critical argument tracing the development of a single concept (e.g., imitation, imagination, or the role of the author) across multiple historical periods covered in the syllabus.	Create / Evaluate
COS6	Demonstrate proficiency in using critical terminology in written analysis.	Apply

Curriculum Details – Unit-wise Distribution

Unit	Topic	Hours
Unit 1	The Greek Masters – Plato's 'Attack on Poetry'; Aristotle's 'Observations on Poetry and Tragedy'	15
Unit 2	General Survey from 'The Battle of Tastes' and 'The Triumph of Classicism'	15
Unit 3	General Survey from 'The Romantic Revolt' and 'Victorian Compromise'	15
Unit 4	General Survey from 'The Age of Interrogation'	15

	Total	60
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How to Use These Notes

These notes are organised unit-wise, following the prescribed syllabus structure. Each unit opens with its key learning focus, proceeds through detailed conceptual explanation of every prescribed topic, and closes with a unit summary, important terms, and likely examination questions. Wherever useful, comparative tables and quotations from primary critical texts are provided to aid revision. Students are encouraged to read these notes alongside the prescribed primary texts – Plato’s Republic (Books II, III, X), Aristotle’s Poetics, and representative critical essays of the Neoclassical, Romantic, Victorian, and Modern periods – since examination questions often require direct engagement with these sources.

Best Wishes!!!

Dr Narsingh Pimparne

Department of English

Bahirji Smarak Mahavidyalaya Basmathnagar

Unit 1: The Greek Masters

This unit traces the origin of Western literary criticism in classical Greece, focusing on two towering figures whose positions on poetry define the opening debate of the entire critical tradition: Plato, who launches a moral and philosophical attack on poetry, and his student Aristotle, who answers that attack by defending poetry as a legitimate and valuable mode of knowledge. Together, their writings establish the foundational vocabulary – imitation, inspiration, catharsis, the nature of truth in art – that later criticism continues to revisit for the next two and a half thousand years.

1.1 Historical and Philosophical Background

Literary criticism as a formal discipline begins in Athens in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, a period of immense intellectual ferment that produced tragedy, comedy, rhetoric, history, and philosophy almost simultaneously. Poetry in this world was not a marginal leisure activity; it was the primary vehicle of Greek education, religious instruction, and civic memory. Homer's epics were treated as encyclopaedic sources of moral, military, and even theological knowledge, recited and memorised by schoolchildren. It is against this backdrop – poetry as the de facto curriculum of Greek culture – that Plato's objections must be understood. He is not attacking a trivial entertainment; he is attacking what he sees as a dangerously unreliable rival to philosophy in the education of the soul and the citizen.

Plato (c. 428–348 BCE) was a student of Socrates and the founder of the Academy in Athens. His critique of poetry appears mainly in the *Republic*, especially Books II, III, and X, though related ideas surface in the *Ion*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Laws*. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was Plato's own student at the Academy for nearly twenty years before founding his own school, the Lyceum. His defence of poetry, the *Poetics*, was likely composed as lecture notes rather than a polished public treatise, which accounts for its compressed, sometimes fragmentary style. Reading the two together is essential: Aristotle's *Poetics* is best understood as a structured, point-by-point rebuttal of his teacher's position.

1.2 Plato's Attack on Poetry

1.2.1 The Theory of Forms and the Doctrine of Imitation (Mimesis)

Plato's objection to poetry cannot be separated from his broader metaphysics, particularly the Theory of Forms. According to this theory, the physical world we perceive through our senses is not ultimate reality but only a shifting, imperfect copy of eternal, unchanging Forms or Ideas that exist in a realm accessible only to reason. A particular bed that a carpenter builds, for instance, is itself only a copy of the ideal Form of 'Bedness' that exists in the world of Forms.

Plato then applies this scheme to art. In Book X of the *Republic*, he argues that the painter who paints a bed, or the poet who describes a bed, is not even working at the level of the carpenter who makes the physical bed; the artist merely imitates the carpenter's imitation. Poetry, like painting, is therefore mimesis – imitation – but imitation at third remove from truth: the Form is the first reality,

the physical object made by the craftsman is the second-level copy, and the poet's or painter's representation of that object is a copy of a copy, twice removed from the truth of the Form. On this logic, poetry is intellectually and ontologically inferior: it traffics in appearances of appearances, never in reality itself.

"The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing of true existence; he knows appearances only." – Plato, Republic, Book X (paraphrased sense of the argument)

This 'three removes from truth' argument is the philosophical core of Plato's case and should be reproduced carefully in examination answers, since it is frequently asked as a standalone question.

1.2.2 The Moral Objection: Poetry Corrupts the Guardians

Beyond the metaphysical complaint, Plato raises an equally serious moral and educational objection, developed mainly in Books II and III of the Republic, where he is designing the education of the Guardians – the philosopher-rulers and soldiers of his ideal state, Kallipolis. Plato argues that poetry, especially Homeric epic and Athenian tragedy, presents the gods and heroes behaving in ways that are morally corrupting: the gods lie, quarrel, commit adultery, and behave with petty cruelty; heroes weep excessively, fear death, and display intemperate passions.

- ✓ Poetry shows gods as the source of both good and evil, when in truth, Plato insists, the gods (being perfectly good) can only be the cause of good.
- ✓ Poetry shows heroes lamenting and fearing death, which teaches young Guardians cowardice rather than the courage the state requires of them.
- ✓ Poetry depicts excessive laughter, even among the gods, which Plato sees as encouraging a lack of self-control and dignity.
- ✓ Poetry glamorises injustice when it is profitable and shows the unjust as happy, undermining the moral lesson that justice itself is desirable.

Because the young are highly impressionable and cannot yet distinguish allegory from literal truth, Plato concludes that such stories, however beautifully composed, must be heavily censored or banned from the ideal state's early education.

1.2.3 The Psychological Objection: Poetry Feeds the Irrational Part of the Soul

Plato divides the human soul into three parts: the rational part (reason), the spirited part (will, honour, courage), and the appetitive part (desires, passions, emotions). The just and well-ordered soul is one in which reason rules over spirit and appetite. Poetry, Plato argues in Book X, works by appealing directly to the appetitive and emotional part of the soul rather than to reason. Tragic poetry, in particular, encourages audiences to indulge in grief, pity, and lamentation – emotions that a rational, self-controlled person would normally suppress in real life. By giving pleasure in the uncontrolled expression of emotion, poetry 'waters and fosters' the irrational element, weakening the rule of reason within the soul. Comic poetry similarly indulges the desire to mock and ridicule. The

cumulative effect, for Plato, is the gradual corruption of psychological order – poetry destabilises precisely the inner harmony that philosophy and a just education aim to cultivate.

1.2.4 The Question of Poetic Inspiration: The Ion

In the dialogue *Ion*, Plato considers the rhapsode (a professional reciter of Homer) and asks whether his skill is a genuine art (*techne*) involving knowledge, or something else. Socrates concludes that poets and rhapsodes do not compose or perform through rational skill or knowledge but through a kind of divine madness or inspiration – a frenzy sent by the Muses in which the poet is literally not in his right mind. While this might sound like praise, for Plato it is in fact a further reason for distrust: if poets do not know what they are doing, if they speak truths (when they do) without understanding why, then they cannot be relied upon as teachers, since teaching requires knowledge, not mere possession by inspiration. The image of the poet as a magnet passing on a force he himself does not understand (the rhapsode is magnetised by the poet, the audience by the rhapsode) reduces the poet's authority as a source of wisdom.

1.2.5 The Banishment of the Poets

Plato's famous and provocative conclusion in Book X is that, despite loving poetry himself and acknowledging its charm, he must banish the poets – or at least unsupervised epic and dramatic poets of the existing tradition – from his ideal state, unless they or their defenders can offer a rational defence proving poetry's usefulness to society. He does, however, leave room for hymns to the gods and praises of good men, suggesting his objection is not to poetry as such but to poetry that is morally and philosophically irresponsible. This qualification is important: Plato is less an enemy of literature than a stringent censor demanding that poetry justify itself rationally – a challenge that Aristotle, a generation later, takes up directly.

1.3 Aristotle's Observations on Poetry and Tragedy

1.3.1 The Poetics: Context and Purpose

Aristotle's Poetics survives only in part (the surviving text deals chiefly with tragedy and epic; the promised discussion of comedy is lost) and was likely a set of lecture notes for students at the Lyceum rather than a finished literary work. Its method is markedly different from Plato's: where Plato reasons from abstract metaphysics and moral philosophy downward to poetry, Aristotle proceeds empirically, examining actual poems (above all Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, which he treats as a model tragedy) and inducing general principles from observed practice. This empirical, descriptive method itself constitutes an implicit answer to Plato: rather than asking whether poetry measures up to an ideal Form, Aristotle asks what poetry actually does and how it achieves its effects well or badly.

1.3.2 Redefining Imitation (Mimesis)

Aristotle accepts Plato's basic premise that poetry is imitation, but he strips the term of Plato's negative metaphysical baggage. For Aristotle, mimesis is not a debased copy of a copy but a natural and valuable human activity. He observes that imitation is instinctive in human beings from childhood (we learn through imitation) and that we take a distinctive pleasure in viewing accurate imitations, even of objects that would be painful or repulsive to see in reality – corpses, for instance, or the lowest animals – because the imitation itself satisfies our intellectual desire to learn and to recognise ('ah, this is that'). Imitation is therefore reframed as a mode of learning and cognitive pleasure, not a falsification of reality.

Crucially, Aristotle also shifts the object of imitation. Where Plato's poet imitates particular physical objects (a bed, a person), Aristotle's poet, especially the tragic poet, imitates an action (praxis) – and not merely the specific, accidental events of history but the kind of action that is probable or necessary given human character and circumstance. This leads to his celebrated claim that poetry is more philosophical and of graver import than history, since history tells us only what actually happened in its particularity, while poetry tells us what might happen, what is universally true of human action and motivation. Poetry, in other words, deals with universals, not mere particulars – directly inverting Plato's charge that poetry is twice removed from universal truth.

"Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars." – Aristotle, Poetics, Chapter IX

1.3.3 Defining Tragedy

Aristotle's definition of tragedy in Chapter VI of the Poetics is the single most quoted and examined passage in the entire unit and should be memorised carefully:

Tragedy 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 narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation (catharsis) of these emotions.

Each clause of this definition repays close attention. ‘Serious’ (spoudaios) distinguishes tragedy from comedy, which imitates inferior or trivial actions and characters. ‘Complete, and of a certain magnitude’ introduces Aristotle’s requirement of organic unity – a tragic plot must have a beginning, middle, and end connected by logical or probable necessity, and must be long enough to allow a change of fortune to occur, yet short enough to be grasped by memory as a whole. ‘In the form of action, not narrative’ distinguishes tragedy (a dramatic, enacted form) from epic (a narrated form), even though both, for Aristotle, share the imitation of serious actions. The final clause introduces the famous and much-debated concept of catharsis.

1.3.4 The Six Elements of Tragedy

Aristotle analyses tragedy into six constituent parts, which he ranks in order of importance:

1. Plot (Mythos) – the arrangement of incidents; for Aristotle this is the ‘soul’ of tragedy and the most important element, more important even than character, because tragedy is an imitation not of persons but of action and life.
2. Character (Ethos) – the moral qualities of the agents, revealed through their choices; character is subordinate to plot and exists to serve the action.
3. Thought (Dianoia) – the reasoning, argument, and general statements expressed by the characters.
4. Diction (Lexis) – the verbal expression and the use of language, metre, and style.
5. Melody (Mele) – the musical element, particularly the choral odes, considered the greatest of the pleasurable accessories.
6. Spectacle (Opsis) – the visual and staging element; Aristotle ranks this lowest, as the least artistic and most dependent on the resources of the stage-manager rather than the poet.

This hierarchy – plot as the controlling principle, spectacle as the least essential – has had enormous influence on later criticism, particularly New Criticism’s insistence on the organic unity of the literary work, a connection worth noting for Unit 4.

1.3.5 Plot: Unity, Reversal, Recognition, and the Tragic Hero

Aristotle insists that a well-constructed plot (what he calls a ‘complex’ plot, as opposed to a ‘simple’ one) should contain peripeteia (reversal of fortune) and anagnorisis (recognition), ideally occurring together, as in *Oedipus Rex*, where Oedipus’s recognition of his true identity coincides with the catastrophic reversal of his fortune from king to outcast. The best plots, he argues, also feature hamartia – often translated as ‘tragic flaw’ but more accurately understood as an error of judgement or a mistake made in ignorance, rather than a deliberate moral vice. The tragic hero should be a person of high standing, neither perfectly virtuous (whose fall would merely shock and repel us) nor thoroughly wicked (whose fall would not arouse pity), but an intermediate figure, essentially good,

who falls through some error rather than through depravity. This careful calibration is designed precisely to produce the emotional effects of pity and fear that Aristotle considers essential to tragedy.

1.3.6 Catharsis: The Central Critical Crux

Catharsis (purgation or purification) is the single most debated term in the Poetics, and it functions as Aristotle's direct answer to Plato's psychological objection that tragedy unhealthily nourishes the emotions. Where Plato saw the arousal of pity and fear in an audience as a dangerous indulgence that weakens rational self-control, Aristotle reframes this arousal as therapeutic. Two broad interpretive traditions exist and are worth knowing for examinations:

- The medical/purgative reading: tragedy arouses pity and fear in a controlled aesthetic setting and then discharges or purges these emotions, leaving the audience in a state of emotional relief and equilibrium, much as a medical purgative expels excess or harmful matter from the body.
- The cognitive/clarificatory reading (associated with modern scholars such as Leon Golden): catharsis involves not the expulsion of emotion but an intellectual clarification – the audience comes to understand the causes and nature of pity and fear through the structured experience of the plot, achieving a kind of emotional and moral education.

Whichever reading is favoured, the key point for examination purposes is that catharsis answers Plato directly: tragedy, far from corrupting the soul by feeding its irrational part, actually performs a positive psychological and moral function, training or relieving the emotions rather than merely indulging them.

1.3.7 Aristotle on Epic Poetry

Although the surviving Poetics concentrates on tragedy, Aristotle also discusses epic poetry, comparing it with tragedy in the final chapters of the treatise. Both forms, he notes, are imitations of serious actions involving people of high standing, both employ elevated language, and both may contain reversal, recognition, and suffering. Epic, however, differs from tragedy in its mode of imitation (narrative rather than dramatic), and in scale: epic can encompass a much longer time-span and multiple simultaneous actions (as in Homer's handling of events occurring at the same time in different places), giving it a magnitude and grandeur tragedy, confined to a single staged action, cannot match. Yet in his final comparative judgement, Aristotle controversially ranks tragedy above epic, on the grounds that tragedy achieves its effects more economically, with greater unity and concentration, and combines all the pleasurable elements of epic with the additional resources of melody and spectacle.

1.4 Plato versus Aristotle: A Comparative Summary

Examination questions frequently ask students to differentiate the two thinkers directly. The following comparative points should be internalised rather than merely memorised as a list:

- ✓ **On imitation:** Plato regards mimesis as a copy of a copy, removed from and inferior to truth; Aristotle regards mimesis as a natural, instinctive, and cognitively valuable human activity that can express universal truths about human action.
- ✓ **On truth-value:** Plato holds that poetry deals only with appearances and particulars, never with the Forms; Aristotle holds that poetry, by depicting the probable and necessary, is actually more philosophical than history, which records only particular, contingent facts.
- ✓ **On emotion:** Plato fears that poetry feeds the irrational, appetitive part of the soul and weakens self-control; Aristotle argues that tragedy's arousal of pity and fear culminates in catharsis, a healthy purgation or clarification of those emotions.
- ✓ **On the poet's knowledge:** Plato's *Ion* suggests poets create through irrational divine inspiration without real knowledge or skill, and so cannot be trusted as moral teachers; Aristotle treats poetic composition (especially of tragic plot) as a craft (techne) governed by discoverable rational principles, which the *Poetics* itself sets out to articulate.
- ✓ **On the social and political role of poetry:** Plato wishes to censor or banish most existing poetry from his ideal state to protect the moral formation of the Guardians; Aristotle, writing in a more settled, less utopian frame, treats poetry as a legitimate art with its own internal standards of excellence, deserving serious technical analysis rather than moral censorship.
- ✓ **On method:** Plato argues largely deductively from his metaphysical Theory of Forms and his tripartite theory of the soul; Aristotle argues inductively and empirically, generalising principles from the close observation of actual, successful tragedies, above all *Oedipus Rex*.

1.5 Applying the Concepts: A Worked Illustration

To see how Plato's and Aristotle's frameworks operate in practice, consider how each would approach a single literary example: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the very play Aristotle treats as his model tragedy.

From a Platonic standpoint, *Oedipus Rex* would be open to several objections. The play's very subject matter – a king who unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother – dramatises events of moral horror that, however unintentional on Oedipus's part, expose an audience to disturbing material that could, for impressionable or insufficiently rational viewers, normalise transgression by association, even if the play itself condemns it. Plato would also note that the play's climactic scenes of lamentation – Oedipus's grief, Jocasta's suicide, the chorus's wailing – stage exactly the kind of excessive emotional display that, for Plato, feeds the irrational, appetitive part of the soul and teaches audiences to indulge rather than govern their passions. And the play, as a tragedy, imitates not the eternal Form of justice or piety but a particular sequence of events befalling a particular fictional king – once again, on Plato's reckoning, imitation at a remove from ultimate truth.

Aristotle's analysis of the very same play yields the opposite evaluation, precisely because he applies a different set of criteria. He admires *Oedipus Rex* as a nearly perfect specimen of tragic plot construction: it possesses a complex plot uniting peripeteia and anagnorisis in a single, devastating

scene, in which Oedipus's discovery of his true parentage coincides exactly with his reversal from triumphant king to self-blinded outcast. Oedipus himself exemplifies the ideal tragic hero – a man of high standing and fundamentally good character who falls not through villainy but through hamartia, an error of judgement (his hasty temper at the crossroads, his confident pursuit of truth despite mounting warnings) compounded by tragic circumstance beyond his knowledge or control. And crucially, for Aristotle, the very pity and fear that Plato condemns as dangerous emotional indulgence are, in his view, the mechanism by which the play achieves catharsis: by watching a fundamentally good man undone by forces partly outside his control, the audience experiences and then resolves or clarifies its own capacity for pity (for suffering undeserved) and fear (that such reversal could befall anyone), emerging from the experience not morally weakened but emotionally and cognitively refined.

This single contrasting analysis of one play – the very play Aristotle uses as his touchstone – crystallises the entire quarrel examined in this unit and is an excellent model for examination answers that ask students to apply both philosophers' frameworks to a specific literary text.

Summary

Unit 1 establishes the founding quarrel of Western literary criticism. Plato, reasoning from his Theory of Forms and his psychology of the soul, attacks poetry on three connected grounds: it is metaphysically removed from truth as a copy of a copy; it morally corrupts audiences, especially the young, by presenting bad models of divine and heroic conduct; and it psychologically destabilises the rational soul by feeding pity, fear, and other passions that reason ought to govern. He therefore proposes banishing unsupervised poets from his ideal state unless poetry can rationally justify its social usefulness. Aristotle, his own student, takes up this challenge directly in the Poetics. He redefines imitation as a natural and pleasurable form of learning, reclassifies poetry as more philosophical than history because it expresses universal truths through probable or necessary action, and answers Plato's psychological objection with the theory of catharsis, by which the tragic arousal of pity and fear achieves a purgation or clarification rather than a corruption of the emotions. Aristotle's systematic analysis of tragedy – its definition, its six constituent parts, the primacy of plot, and the mechanics of reversal, recognition, and the tragic hero's hamartia – together constitute the first sustained technical poetics in the Western tradition and the first formal defence of literature's value.

Key Terms

- ✓ **Mimesis – imitation**; the central concept both thinkers use to define poetry, though they evaluate it oppositely.
- ✓ **Theory of Forms** – Plato's metaphysical doctrine that physical and represented objects are imperfect copies of eternal, unchanging Ideas.
- ✓ **Tripartite soul** – Plato's division of the soul into reason, spirit, and appetite.

- ✓ **Hamartia** – the tragic hero's error of judgement, made in ignorance rather than from vice, that precipitates the tragic reversal.
- ✓ **Peripeteia** – reversal of fortune in the plot of a tragedy.
- ✓ **Anagnorisis** – recognition; the change from ignorance to knowledge experienced by a character.
- ✓ **Catharsis** – the purgation or clarification of pity and fear achieved through the experience of tragedy.
- ✓ **Techne** – skill, craft, or art governed by rational, teachable principles, as opposed to mere inspiration.

Likely Examination Questions

1. Discuss Plato's objections to poetry as presented in the Republic. To what extent does Aristotle's Poetics answer these objections?
2. Explain Aristotle's theory of catharsis. How does it function as a response to Plato's psychological critique of poetry?
3. Examine Aristotle's definition of tragedy, with reference to its six constituent elements.
4. 'Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history.' Discuss this statement with reference to Aristotle's concept of imitation.
5. Differentiate between Plato's and Aristotle's understanding of mimesis.
6. Write a note on the concepts of hamartia, peripeteia, and anagnorisis as developed in the Poetics.

Unit 2: The Battle of Tastes and the Triumph of Classicism

This unit moves from classical Greece to early modern and eighteenth-century Europe, particularly England and France, tracing the rise of Neoclassical literary criticism: its insistence on order, decorum, and rule-governed composition modelled on classical antiquity, and the great controversy this provoked – the so-called ‘Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns,’ here glossed as the ‘Battle of Tastes.’ The unit also surveys the eventual consolidation and ‘Triumph of Classicism’ as the dominant critical idiom of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, before its gradual erosion sets the stage for Romanticism in Unit 3.

2.1 What is Neoclassicism?

Neoclassicism refers to the revival and authoritative re-establishment, in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, of classical Graeco-Roman literary values – above all those associated with Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Horace’s *Ars Poetica* – as the binding standard for modern literary composition and judgement. Where the Renaissance had rediscovered classical texts with excitement and reverence, Neoclassicism systematised that reverence into a body of prescriptive rules. The Neoclassical critic’s central conviction was that the ancients had already discovered the permanent, universal laws of good writing, and that the task of the modern writer was not to innovate against these laws but to imitate and perfect them within their own language and circumstances.

Several interlocking values define the Neoclassical sensibility and recur throughout this unit:

- ✓ **Order and decorum** – the conviction that literature, like a well-governed state, requires hierarchy, proportion, and propriety; high subjects demand high style, low subjects low style, and the mixing of registers (tragic and comic, noble and vulgar) was generally condemned as a violation of decorum.
- ✓ **Rules derived from reason and nature** – Neoclassical critics believed that the rules of art (such as the dramatic unities) were not arbitrary conventions but expressions of universal reason and a rationally ordered Nature, and were therefore binding on all writers in all ages.
- ✓ **Imitation of nature through imitation of the ancients** – since the ancients (Homer, Sophocles, Virgil) were held to have already perfected the imitation of Nature, the surest way for a modern writer to imitate Nature correctly was to imitate the ancients who had already succeeded in doing so.
- ✓ **The didactic and social function of literature** – echoing Horace’s formula that poetry should both delight and instruct (*dulce et utile*), Neoclassical criticism consistently judged literary works by their moral usefulness as well as their pleasurable effect.
- ✓ **Correctness, polish, and wit** – a premium placed on technical correctness, balanced and antithetical expression, and verbal wit, especially visible in the heroic couplet as perfected by poets such as Dryden and Pope.

2.2 The Dramatic Unities

No single doctrine better illustrates the Neoclassical temperament than the so-called ‘three unities’ of dramatic composition: unity of action, unity of time, and unity of place. Of these, only unity of action has a genuine basis in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where he insists that a tragic plot should represent a single, complete action with a beginning, middle, and end, and should not be cluttered with unrelated sub-plots. Unity of time (the action of a play should not exceed, roughly, a single revolution of the sun, i.e. about twenty-four hours) is only loosely suggested by a brief, almost incidental remark of Aristotle’s about the customary length of actual tragedies he had observed, not a binding prescriptive rule. Unity of place (the action should occur in a single location) is not in Aristotle at all; it was largely the invention of Italian and French Renaissance commentators, especially Lodovico Castelvetro, who systematised and hardened Aristotle’s descriptive observations into rigid prescriptive law.

French Neoclassical criticism, particularly through theorists and dramatists associated with the Académie française (such as the controversy surrounding Corneille’s *Le Cid* in 1637), enforced the three unities with great strictness, treating them as essential to verisimilitude (the play must seem believable to an audience watching it in real, continuous time in a single physical theatre) and to the classical virtue of concentrated, undiluted dramatic effect. English Neoclassical critics, including John Dryden, engaged with the unities more flexibly, often defending native English dramatic practice (particularly Shakespeare’s freer handling of time and place) against the stricter French model, even while broadly endorsing classical principles. This Anglo-French tension over the unities is itself a miniature version of the larger Quarrel discussed below.

2.3 The Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns (‘The Battle of Tastes’)

2.3.1 Origins and Nature of the Dispute

The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns (*Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*) was a major literary and intellectual controversy that erupted with particular intensity in late seventeenth-century France and soon spread to England. At its heart lay a single, deceptively simple question: are the achievements of classical Greek and Roman writers permanently and definitively superior to anything the modern world, with its new sciences, new religion (Christianity), and new historical experience, could ever produce, or have the moderns equalled or even surpassed the ancients?

The ‘Ancients’ party held that classical literature represented an unsurpassable standard of perfection. Homer, Virgil, and the Greek tragedians had achieved a natural genius and formal perfection that later ages, however learned, could only imitate, never exceed. The ‘Moderns’ party, energised by the spectacular progress of seventeenth-century science (the work of Descartes, Galileo, Newton) and by a growing confidence in human progress generally, argued that just as modern science had advanced far beyond ancient knowledge, modern literature too, equipped with Christian truth, more refined manners, and centuries of additional human experience, could rival or surpass ancient achievement.

2.3.2 The French Phase: Perrault, Boileau, and Fontenelle

The controversy crystallised dramatically in France in 1687, when Charles Perrault read his poem *Le Siècle de Louis le Grand* ('The Century of Louis the Great') before the Académie française, provocatively arguing for the superiority of the modern age, including modern literature, over antiquity. This directly challenged Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, the most authoritative Neoclassical critic of the age and author of *L'Art poétique* (1674), a highly influential verse treatise codifying classical rules of taste, reason, clarity, and decorum on the model of Horace's *Ars Poetica*. Boileau, the foremost champion of the Ancients, responded with satirical fury, defending Homer and the classical inheritance as an irreproachable standard.

Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, meanwhile, offered a more philosophically sophisticated defence of the Moderns in his *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* (1688), arguing that since the human mind and the natural world have not fundamentally changed since antiquity, but human knowledge accumulates progressively over time (as in mathematics and natural science), later ages enjoy a real cumulative advantage; given enough favourable conditions, a modern writer working in a mature, well-resourced civilisation could in principle equal or exceed an ancient one. The dispute eventually subsided into a loosely accepted compromise: the ancients retained a special, foundational authority and excellence, particularly in poetry and rhetoric, while the moderns were acknowledged to have advanced significantly in science, philosophy, and certain prose forms.

2.3.3 The English Phase: Temple and Swift

The Quarrel crossed the Channel chiefly through Sir William Temple's essay *Of Ancient and Modern Learning* (1690), which forcefully championed the Ancients, going so far as to praise the (subsequently exposed as largely spurious or much later) *Epistles of Phalaris* as proof of superior ancient wisdom. This claim provoked the formidable counter-scholarship of the classicist Richard Bentley, who demonstrated on rigorous philological grounds that the *Epistles* were not genuinely ancient at all. The English quarrel found its most enduring literary monument not in scholarly treatise but in satire: Jonathan Swift's mock-heroic prose work *The Battle of the Books* (written around 1697, published 1704) allegorises the dispute as a literal battle between books of the Ancients and books of the Moderns in St James's Library, siding wittily, like his patron Temple, with the Ancients, while satirising the pedantry and self-importance of contemporary modern scholarship, particularly Bentley's.

In examination terms, the key takeaway from the English phase is that, although nominally a scholarly dispute, the *Battle of the Books* reveals how literary criticism in this period was deeply entangled with questions of cultural authority, national pride, and satire, anticipating the broader eighteenth-century preoccupation (visible across Swift's and Pope's work) with the proper relationship between tradition and contemporary achievement.

2.4 The Triumph of Classicism in England

2.4.1 John Dryden: ‘Father of English Criticism’

John Dryden (1631–1700) is conventionally regarded as the founder of modern English literary criticism. His *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), structured as a civilised dialogue among four speakers debating the relative merits of ancient versus modern, French versus English drama, and rhymed versus blank verse, exemplifies the Neoclassical critical method at its most balanced and judicious. Rather than dogmatically imposing classical rules, Dryden weighs them against the practical achievements of English drama, especially Shakespeare and Jonson, arriving at flexible, comparative judgements rather than rigid prescriptions. His famous tribute to Shakespeare – praising his comprehensive, intuitive genius even while acknowledging his technical irregularities by classical standards – exemplifies the Neoclassical critic’s difficulty in reconciling rule-bound theory with the undeniable greatness of rule-breaking native genius, a tension that becomes increasingly important as the eighteenth century proceeds toward Romanticism.

Dryden also did crucial work as a translator and adapter of classical texts (Virgil, Ovid, Juvenal) and developed an influential theory of translation, distinguishing between ‘metaphrase’ (literal, word-for-word translation), ‘paraphrase’ (translation with reasonable latitude, preserving sense over literal wording), and ‘imitation’ (a freer adaptation taking only the general idea of the original) – a tripartite scheme that remains a standard reference point in translation theory.

2.4.2 Alexander Pope and the Codification of Taste

Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), written in heroic couplets and modelled self-consciously on Horace’s *Ars Poetica* and Boileau’s *L’Art poétique*, represents the fullest English poetic codification of Neoclassical critical doctrine. Pope insists that ‘Nature’ (understood as the universal, rationally ordered, and morally significant order of reality, not mere external scenery) is the true and only standard of art, but that the ancients, particularly Homer, had already discovered and perfectly embodied the rules for imitating Nature; the rules of criticism are therefore simply ‘Nature methodized.’ The poem also stresses the dangers of false wit, the necessity of following ‘the rules’ with informed taste rather than slavish pedantry, and the social, civilised function of sound criticism, conducted with humility and generosity rather than malice.

“Those rules of old discovered, not devised, / Are Nature still, but Nature methodized.”
– Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*

2.4.3 Samuel Johnson: The Late Flowering and Internal Critique of Neoclassicism

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), though writing somewhat later and often regarded as a transitional figure bridging Neoclassicism and the coming Romantic sensibility, remains substantially within the Neoclassical critical framework while subjecting some of its rigidities to searching internal critique. In his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765), Johnson memorably defends Shakespeare’s disregard of the unities of time and place, arguing that dramatic illusion does not in fact depend on a literal, continuous correspondence between stage time/place and represented time/place, since audiences

always know they are in a theatre and willingly suspend disbelief regardless of strict temporal or spatial unity; what truly matters, for Johnson, is fidelity to general, universal human nature, which Shakespeare achieves supremely despite violating mechanical classical rules. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* similarly combines biographical narrative with judicious, often severe critical evaluation grounded in common sense, moral seriousness, and a Neoclassical insistence on general nature and rational propriety, even as his practical critical judgements increasingly make room for genius that exceeds rule.

2.5 Horace's Continuing Influence

Although chronologically a Roman poet of the Augustan age rather than a participant in the Neoclassical period proper, Horace's *Ars Poetica* (Art of Poetry) functioned throughout the Neoclassical era as a kind of secondary scripture alongside Aristotle's *Poetics*, and no account of this unit is complete without reference to it. Horace's key formulations – that poetry should combine the useful and the pleasing (*dulce et utile*, 'sweet and useful'), that propriety and decorum (appropriate matching of style, character, and subject) are essential, that a poet should labour patiently over composition and revise extensively ('let it be kept back till the ninth year'), and that art requires a balance of natural talent (*ingenium*) and disciplined craft (*ars*) – supplied the Neoclassical critical vocabulary with much of its working terminology, particularly the recurrent demand that literature be simultaneously delightful and morally or socially instructive.

2.6 Significance and Eventual Decline

The Neoclassical insistence on order, rule, decorum, and the authority of classical models gave English and European literary criticism, for the first time, a coherent, systematically articulated body of theory comparable to (and consciously modelled on) the great classical treatises. It produced genuinely sophisticated critical instruments – Dryden's comparative method, Pope's codification of taste, Johnson's combination of rule and common-sense judgement – and entrenched habits of careful, reasoned literary evaluation that persist in critical practice today. Yet by the mid-to-late eighteenth century, the very rigidities the system depended upon – its suspicion of unregulated genius, its privileging of decorum over passionate individual expression, its preference for the general and universal over the particular and the personal – increasingly chafed against new currents of thought: a growing interest in original genius (visible in Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 1759), in primitive and folk poetry, in the sublime (as theorised by Edmund Burke), and in individual emotional experience. These currents would crystallise, by the turn of the nineteenth century, into the Romantic Revolt examined in Unit 3.

2.7 Applying the Concepts: Pope and the Heroic Couplet

The practical operation of Neoclassical values is nowhere clearer than in the heroic couplet – paired, end-stopped lines of iambic pentameter rhyming aabb – which Pope, following Dryden, perfected as the characteristic verse form of the age. The couplet's tight, balanced, end-stopped structure is itself a formal embodiment of Neoclassical decorum: its enforced brevity demands compression,

antithesis, and verbal economy; its rhyme imposes an audible, predictable order upon the line; and its frequent internal balance (often a caesura dividing the line into two matched, antithetical halves) allows the poet to stage exactly the kind of measured, witty, rationally weighed contrasts that Neoclassical criticism prized as the highest form of ‘correct’ poetic expression. When Pope writes of false critics who praise indiscriminately, or of writers who mistake mere ornament for genuine wit, the couplet form itself performs the satirical judgement the lines describe: disorder of thought is exposed precisely by being forced into the couplet’s orderly, balanced mould and found wanting. This fusion of form and doctrine – a verse structure that materially enacts the values of order, balance, and rational restraint that Neoclassical theory prescribes – offers students a useful concrete example for examination answers asking how Neoclassical theory and practice reinforce one another.

Summary

Unit 2 examines how Renaissance and seventeenth-century critics revived and systematised the authority of classical literature, above all the Poetics of Aristotle and the Ars Poetica of Horace, into a rule-governed Neoclassical aesthetic built on order, decorum, the dramatic unities, and the conviction that Nature is best imitated by imitating the ancients who had already perfected that imitation. This authority was sharply contested in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, fought out in France between Boileau’s defence of antiquity and Perrault and Fontenelle’s assertion of modern progress, and in England through Temple’s championing of the Ancients and Swift’s satirical Battle of the Books. In England, this Neoclassical sensibility achieved its fullest critical expression in Dryden’s comparative, judicious criticism, Pope’s poetic codification of taste in An Essay on Criticism, and Johnson’s late, partially self-questioning Neoclassicism, which began to make room for individual genius that exceeds mechanical rule – a fault line that anticipates the coming Romantic revolution.

Key Terms

- **Decorum** – the principle of propriety and fitness between subject, style, and characters in a literary work.
- **The Three Unities** – unity of action, time, and place, prescribed for drama by Neoclassical theorists, with only unity of action genuinely rooted in Aristotle.
- **Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes** – the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns; the dispute over whether classical or contemporary literature represents the higher achievement.
- **Dulce et utile** – Horace’s formula that literature should be both pleasing (sweet) and instructive (useful).
- **Nature methodized** – Pope’s formula describing classical rules as the rational, systematic expression of universal Nature, not arbitrary convention.
- **Wit** – in Neoclassical usage, a quality of verbal ingenuity, aptness, and balanced antithesis, prized especially in satire and the heroic couplet.

Likely Examination Questions

1. Discuss the key features of Neoclassical literary criticism with reference to the doctrine of the Three Unities.
2. Examine the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. How did this debate unfold differently in France and in England?
3. Assess Dryden's contribution to English literary criticism with reference to *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*.
4. 'Those rules of old discovered, not devised, / Are Nature still, but Nature methodized.' Discuss Pope's view of the relationship between Nature and classical rules in *An Essay on Criticism*.
5. How does Samuel Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare both uphold and challenge Neoclassical principles?
6. Write a note on Horace's *Ars Poetica* and its influence on Neoclassical criticism.

Unit 3: The Romantic Revolt and the Victorian Compromise

This unit examines two consecutive but contrasting phases of nineteenth-century English literary criticism. The first, the Romantic Revolt, overturns Neoclassical orthodoxy by elevating emotion, imagination, and spontaneous individual expression above rule and decorum. The second, Victorian criticism, inherits Romantic insights but tempers them with a new, anxious seriousness about the social and moral function of art in an age of industrialisation, religious doubt, and rapid social change – producing what this syllabus aptly terms a ‘compromise’ between Romantic individualism and a renewed Neoclassical-style concern for art’s public responsibility.

3.1 The Romantic Revolt: Historical and Intellectual Context

Romanticism in English literature is conventionally dated from the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 to roughly the early 1830s, though its critical assumptions continue to shape literary thought well beyond that period. The movement emerged against a complex background: the political upheaval of the French Revolution (1789) and its promise, later disappointed, of liberty and human renewal; a reaction against the perceived mechanical rationalism, urban artificiality, and social hierarchy of Neoclassical culture; the growing cult of individual genius inherited from late-eighteenth-century thinkers such as Edward Young; and a new philosophical interest, partly absorbed from German Idealist thought (especially Kant and Schelling, transmitted to England chiefly through Coleridge), in the creative, world-shaping power of the human mind itself, rather than the mind as a passive mirror reflecting external reality.

Where Neoclassical criticism had located the source of artistic value in the external world (‘Nature’ as an objective, rationally ordered reality to be faithfully imitated according to inherited classical rules), Romantic criticism relocates that value within the creative subjectivity of the individual poet. This is often summarised, following the critic M. H. Abrams’s influential study *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), as a shift from a mimetic theory of art (the mind as mirror, passively reflecting an external world) to an expressive theory of art (the mind as lamp, actively projecting its own light, colouring and partly creating the world it perceives).

3.2 Core Tenets of Romantic Criticism

3.2.1 The Primacy of Emotion

Romantic criticism insists that powerful feeling, rather than rational calculation or rule-following, is the true source and proper subject of poetry. William Wordsworth’s *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800, expanded 1802) – arguably the single most important manifesto of English Romantic criticism – offers the movement’s most quoted definition:

“*Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.*” – William Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

This celebrated formula requires careful unpacking for examination purposes, since it contains an apparent paradox: poetry is ‘spontaneous,’ yet it arises only after the original emotion has been ‘recollected in tranquillity,’ that is, recalled and contemplated at a later, calmer moment, until a new, kindred emotion (related to but distinct from the original) spontaneously arises and is then given controlled poetic expression. Composition is thus simultaneously spontaneous (in its ultimate emotional source) and reflective or even craftsmanlike (in the considered process by which that emotion is eventually shaped into verse) – a synthesis of feeling and art that distinguishes mature Romantic theory from a merely naive cult of unprocessed emotional outburst.

3.2.2 The Creative Imagination

If emotion supplies the energy of Romantic poetry, imagination supplies its shaping, creative power, and no concept is more central to Romantic criticism. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* (1817) offers the period’s most philosophically ambitious theory of imagination, distinguishing it sharply from mere Fancy. For Coleridge, Fancy is a lower mental faculty that simply combines and rearranges fixed, ready-made mental images drawn from memory, much as a mosaic-maker arranges pre-existing tiles; it works mechanically, by association, and creates nothing genuinely new. Imagination, by contrast, is divided into the Primary Imagination – the basic, universal creative power by which every human mind actively perceives and organises the world (an unconscious, continuous act of creation underlying ordinary perception itself) – and the Secondary Imagination, the conscious, deliberately exercised poetic faculty that ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create’ the materials of perception into a new, unified, organic artistic whole.

“The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception... The secondary I consider as an echo of the former... It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create.” – S. T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIII

This Coleridgean theory of imagination as an organic, unifying, almost god-like creative power (he describes it as ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’) elevates the poet’s creative faculty to an unprecedented metaphysical dignity, directly opposed to the Neoclassical view of art as skilled, rule-governed imitation of an already-existing external order.

3.2.3 Spontaneity and Organic Form

Romantic criticism rejects the Neoclassical model of literary form as a fixed, externally imposed mechanical structure (the unities, the heroic couplet, generic decorum) in favour of an organic theory of form, in which a poem’s structure grows naturally and inevitably from its inner content and the poet’s individual creative vision, much as a living plant grows according to its own internal principle rather than an externally applied geometric pattern. This organicist conception, again substantially developed by Coleridge (drawing on German Idealist aesthetics), underlies the Romantic suspicion of mechanical rules and its corresponding valorisation of the individual poet’s unique, spontaneous, and unrepeatable creative act.

3.2.4 The Poet as Visionary and the Role of Nature

Romantic criticism elevates the figure of the poet from a skilled craftsman, working within inherited classical convention, to a visionary, even prophetic figure possessing privileged insight into truths inaccessible to ordinary reason. Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (written 1821, published 1840) makes this claim most extravagantly, famously declaring poets to be the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world,' since poetic imagination, for Shelley, apprehends moral and metaphysical truths that shape civilisation more fundamentally than political or legal institutions. Nature, correspondingly, ceases to be merely an external object to be accurately imitated (as in Neoclassical mimesis) and becomes instead a living, almost spiritual presence with which the poet's mind engages in active, reciprocal communion – a relationship explored at length in Wordsworth's longer philosophical poetry, where natural landscape becomes inseparable from the poet's own moral and spiritual development.

3.2.5 Keats and Negative Capability

John Keats, in a private letter of 1817, introduced the concept of 'Negative Capability,' describing it as the capacity to remain 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' – the poet's willingness to dwell imaginatively within ambiguity and contradiction rather than forcing premature rational resolution. Though informal and occasional rather than a systematic treatise, this concept has proved enormously influential in later criticism (anticipating, in some readings, twentieth-century concerns with ambiguity examined in Unit 4) and exemplifies the Romantic preference for imaginative receptivity over rigid Neoclassical rule and logical system.

3.3 The Victorian Compromise

3.3.1 Historical and Cultural Context

Victorian criticism (broadly the period from the 1830s to the end of the nineteenth century) develops against a dramatically altered social landscape: rapid industrialisation and urbanisation; the social dislocation and inequality chronicled in the 'Condition of England' debates; the growing prestige and apparent threat of science, particularly the crisis of religious faith provoked by Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and earlier geological and biblical-critical scholarship; and an anxious sense, among many serious-minded Victorians, that traditional religious and social certainties were dissolving. Victorian critics inherit the Romantic legacy of imagination and emotional intensity but feel compelled, in this new context, to ask urgently what social and moral role art and criticism should play in a fragmented, doubt-ridden, materially driven modern society – hence the description of this phase as a 'compromise' between Romantic individualism and a renewed, almost Neoclassical sense of art's public duty and moral seriousness.

3.3.2 Matthew Arnold: Criticism, Culture, and 'Touchstones'

Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) stands as the central figure of Victorian literary criticism. In his essay *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1864), Arnold defines criticism as 'a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world,' insisting that

genuine criticism must rise above immediate practical, political, or personal interest ('disinterestedness') to pursue truth and excellence for their own sake. He further argues that great creative literary epochs depend upon a prior 'critical effort' to clarify and circulate the best ideas of the age, suggesting that criticism is not a parasitic or secondary activity but actively prepares the cultural ground for creative achievement.

"The business of the critical power... is, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is." – Matthew Arnold, The Function of Criticism at the Present Time

In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold extends this critical project into a broader social and educational programme, defining culture as 'the study of perfection,' a disinterested pursuit of 'sweetness and light' (a phrase borrowed from Swift) capable of countering the social fragmentation and class-based narrowness he diagnoses in contemporary England, which he famously divides into Barbarians (the aristocracy), Philistines (the commercial middle class), and the Populace (the working class) – each limited by its own partial, self-interested perspective, which only a disinterested culture of true criticism can transcend.

For practical critical evaluation, Arnold proposes, in *The Study of Poetry* (1880), the method of 'touchstones': brief, exemplary passages from acknowledged supreme poets (Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton), which the critic holds in mind as a standard of comparison against which the real, lasting greatness of any other poetry can be tested. This method, while sometimes criticised as impressionistic and insufficiently systematic, expresses Arnold's deep conviction that genuine critical judgement requires touchstones of acknowledged excellence rather than mere contemporary fashion or personal preference.

3.3.3 John Ruskin: Art, Morality, and Society

John Ruskin (1819–1900), though primarily an art critic, exerted enormous influence on Victorian literary and cultural criticism through his insistence that aesthetic and moral values are inseparable: a society's art directly reflects, and is shaped by, its moral and social condition. In works such as *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin argues that great art requires 'truth to nature' combined with moral seriousness and that the degraded, mechanised labour conditions of industrial society (as opposed to the dignified, individually expressive craftsmanship of medieval Gothic builders, whom he idealises) inevitably produce degraded art. Ruskin's coupling of aesthetic and social-moral critique anticipates and influences later socially engaged criticism, including aspects of Marxist criticism examined in Unit 4.

3.3.4 Walter Pater: Aestheticism and the Cult of Sensation

Walter Pater (1839–1894) represents a significant counter-current within Victorian criticism, moving away from Arnold's and Ruskin's insistence on art's moral and social responsibility toward a doctrine more commonly known as Aestheticism, summarised in the slogan 'art for art's sake.' In the famous, controversial 'Conclusion' to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Pater

argues that since all experience is fleeting and consciousness itself is a flux of momentary impressions, the highest wisdom lies not in pursuing fixed moral or theoretical doctrines but in maximising the intensity and quality of present aesthetic experience – ‘to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame.’ Pater’s emphasis on subjective sensation and impression, and his relative indifference to art’s explicit moral utility, scandalised many contemporaries (he removed the ‘Conclusion’ from the second edition under pressure, fearing its corrupting influence on young readers) but proved enormously influential on the later Aesthetic and Decadent movements, including Oscar Wilde.

3.3.5 The Crisis of Doubt and the Critical Response

A recurring undertone throughout Victorian criticism is the felt loss of settled religious and metaphysical certainty, often described as the Victorian ‘crisis of faith.’ Arnold’s own poetry (most famously ‘Dover Beach,’ with its image of the ebbing ‘Sea of Faith’) and his criticism both register this anxiety, and his proposal that ‘the best part of our religion... is its poetry’ (in *The Study of Poetry*) reflects a characteristic Victorian critical move: as traditional religious certainty recedes, literature and literary criticism are increasingly called upon to perform some of the consoling, meaning-making, and morally instructive functions formerly supplied by religion – a heightened, almost sacred seriousness about literature’s cultural function that distinguishes Victorian criticism from both the more confidently rule-bound Neoclassical age and the more purely personal, visionary emphasis of Romanticism.

3.4 Comparing Romantic and Victorian Criticism

This comparative framework is frequently tested directly in examinations and should be carefully understood rather than mechanically memorised.

- ✓ **On the source of value:** Romantic criticism locates poetic value chiefly in the individual poet’s emotion and creative imagination; Victorian criticism, while still valuing imagination, increasingly subordinates individual expression to literature’s social, moral, and cultural responsibilities.
- ✓ **On the role of the critic:** Romantic criticism (especially in Coleridge) is often itself visionary and philosophical, exploring the metaphysics of creativity; Victorian criticism (especially in Arnold) reconceives the critic as a disinterested public educator, charged with discerning and propagating ‘the best that is known and thought.’
- ✓ **On art and morality:** Romantic criticism, while not amoral, generally trusts that authentic emotional and imaginative expression is itself valuable and even morally elevating; Victorian criticism (Arnold, Ruskin) more explicitly and anxiously insists that art must serve identifiable moral and social ends, partly in response to the perceived dangers of industrial materialism and religious doubt – though this consensus is itself challenged from within by Pater’s aestheticism.

- ✓ **On form:** Romantic criticism favours organic form, growing spontaneously from individual content; Victorian criticism, less innovative in formal theory, focuses more on the substantive cultural content and social function of literature than on theorising new principles of form.
- ✓ **On historical mood:** Romantic criticism emerges from revolutionary political optimism and a reaction against Neoclassical artificiality; Victorian criticism emerges from anxiety about industrial dislocation, social fragmentation, and the erosion of religious certainty, producing a more troubled, self-questioning, and socially conscious critical temperament.

3.5 Applying the Concepts: Reading a Romantic and a Victorian Critic Together

It is instructive to see how a Romantic and a Victorian critic might respond differently to the same poetic moment – say, a lyric expressing intense, private grief over personal loss, of the kind found throughout the period (Wordsworth’s ‘Lucy’ poems, or Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, itself a great bridge text between the two sensibilities). A purely Romantic critical response, in the spirit of Wordsworth’s Preface, would value such a poem chiefly for the authenticity and intensity of the feeling it embodies, judging its success by how faithfully and powerfully it communicates an essentially private, individual emotional experience – grief recollected in tranquillity until a kindred poetic emotion spontaneously, organically takes shape in verse. The critic’s task, on this model, is largely to trace how successfully the poem’s organic form grows out of and embodies that originating emotion.

A Victorian critic in the Arnoldian mode would ask a further, more socially oriented question: does this poem, beyond its private emotional authenticity, also offer something of disinterested, generally applicable value – does it rise, in Arnold’s terms, to the status of a ‘touchstone,’ expressing not merely one person’s grief but something of universal and consoling significance for an age that, as Arnold elsewhere laments, has lost much of its settled religious certainty? Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* is in fact often read in precisely these terms: a poem that begins in intensely private, almost Romantic grief for a dead friend, but gradually, across its long course, work towards a more general, quasi-religious meditation on faith, doubt, evolution, and the possibility of consolation – exactly the kind of literature Arnold suggests must increasingly take up functions earlier supplied by religion itself. Reading the same poem through both lenses – Romantic authenticity of feeling, Victorian search for disinterested cultural and moral value – demonstrates concretely how the two critical sensibilities, while continuous in their valuing of imaginative power, differ in what further questions they bring to a text.

Summary

Unit 3 traces the displacement of Neoclassical rule by Romantic theories of emotion, imagination, and organic spontaneity, exemplified in Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, Coleridge’s philosophical distinction between Fancy and the Primary and Secondary Imagination, and Shelley’s and Keats’s visionary conceptions of the poet’s creative and imaginative authority. The unit then examines how Victorian criticism, confronting industrial dislocation and a crisis of religious faith, both inherits and modifies this Romantic legacy: Matthew

Arnold reconceives criticism as a disinterested pursuit of cultural excellence and proposes the touchstone method of evaluation; John Ruskin insists on the inseparability of art, morality, and social condition; and Walter Pater, in tension with this moralising consensus, develops an aesthetic philosophy privileging intense subjective sensation over explicit moral utility. Together these figures represent a distinctively Victorian compromise between Romantic individual feeling and a renewed, socially anxious insistence on art's public and moral function.

Key Terms

- ✓ **Mimetic theory versus expressive theory** – Abrams's distinction between art as a mirror reflecting external reality (Neoclassical) and art as a lamp projecting the poet's inner light (Romantic).
- ✓ **Fancy versus Imagination** – Coleridge's distinction between the mechanical, associative combination of fixed images (Fancy) and the organic, creative, unifying power of the mind (Imagination).
- ✓ **Organic form** – the Romantic conception of literary structure as growing naturally from a work's inner content, rather than being imposed by external rule.
- ✓ **Negative Capability** – Keats's term for the capacity to remain in uncertainty and doubt without an irritable reaching after fixed fact or reason.
- ✓ **Disinterestedness** – Arnold's requirement that genuine criticism transcend practical, political, or personal interest in pursuit of objective truth and excellence.
- ✓ **Touchstones** – Arnold's method of using exemplary passages from acknowledged great poets as standards against which other poetry is critically tested.
- ✓ **Art for art's sake (Aestheticism)** – Pater's doctrine privileging the intensity of aesthetic experience over art's explicit moral or social utility.

Likely Examination Questions

1. Discuss Wordsworth's definition of poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' with reference to the Preface to Lyrical Ballads.
2. Explain Coleridge's distinction between Fancy and Imagination as developed in *Biographia Literaria*.
3. Examine Matthew Arnold's conception of the function of criticism and his 'touchstone' method of evaluation.
4. Compare and contrast Romantic and Victorian views on the relationship between art and morality.
5. Write a note on Walter Pater's doctrine of 'art for art's sake' and its significance within Victorian criticism.
6. How does Victorian criticism respond to the social and religious anxieties of its age? Discuss with reference to Arnold and Ruskin.

Unit 4: The Age of Interrogation

The final unit surveys the explosion of competing critical schools that characterises twentieth-century Western literary criticism, a period so methodologically diverse and so persistently self-questioning about the nature, purpose, and very possibility of interpretation that it is aptly termed an ‘Age of Interrogation.’ Where earlier periods largely shared a common set of assumptions (however contested in detail) about literature’s relationship to truth, nature, or morality, twentieth-century criticism repeatedly interrogates its own foundational categories – the author, the text, the reader, meaning itself – producing a sequence of distinct and often mutually opposed schools: Formalism, New Criticism, Psychoanalytic criticism, and the early stirrings of Marxist and Structuralist thought, the four areas specified in this syllabus.

4.1 Why ‘Interrogation’? The General Character of Twentieth-Century Criticism

Several interlinked developments explain why this period breaks so decisively from earlier criticism. The rise of modern linguistics, especially Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics (Course in General Linguistics, posthumously published 1916), demonstrated that language is a self-contained system of differential signs whose meaning arises from internal relations rather than any direct, natural correspondence to external reality – a discovery that destabilised older, common-sense assumptions about literary language simply ‘expressing’ reality or authorial intention. The rise of psychoanalysis, particularly Sigmund Freud’s theories of the unconscious, radically complicated the notion of a unified, self-transparent authorial consciousness, suggesting that literary texts (like dreams and slips of the tongue) might encode meanings of which even their authors were unaware. The rise of Marxist political economy directed critical attention toward the ideological and economic conditions underlying literary production, challenging the idea that literature is an autonomous realm detached from material social struggle. And institutionally, the professionalisation of literary study within twentieth-century universities created strong pressure for criticism to develop rigorous, teachable, ‘scientific’ methodologies of close textual analysis, rather than relying on the more impressionistic, belletristic judgements characteristic of nineteenth-century criticism (as in Pater or the early Arnold).

4.2 Formalism

4.2.1 Russian Formalism: Origins and Key Concepts

Russian Formalism, emerging roughly between 1914 and the late 1920s through groups such as the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the St Petersburg-based OPOJAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language), represents one of the earliest and most rigorous attempts to study literature as a distinct, self-sufficient system governed by its own internal laws, rather than as a vehicle for biography, history, psychology, or moral content. Formalist critics, including Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eikhenbaum, and Roman Jakobson, insisted that the proper object of literary study is not the work’s paraphrasable content or its relation to the author’s life and times, but literariness (literaturnost) itself

– the specific formal devices and techniques that distinguish literary language from ordinary, practical communication.

The Formalists' most influential single concept is Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarisation (*ostranenie*, literally 'making strange'), introduced in his 1917 essay 'Art as Technique.' Shklovsky argues that habitual perception renders everyday objects and experiences invisible through over-familiarity; the special function of art and literary technique is to defamiliarise such objects, presenting them in unusual, estranging ways (through unexpected formal devices, unfamiliar narrative perspectives, or deliberately impeded, slowed-down language) so that perception is renewed and the object is, in effect, seen freshly and consciously again, rather than merely 'recognised' through habit.

"Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life... The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception." – Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique'

Closely related is the Formalist distinction between *fabula* (story – the raw chronological sequence of events as they would have occurred in real time) and *syuzhet* (plot – the actual, often reordered and selectively presented arrangement of those events as given in the literary text itself); Formalist analysis is particularly interested in how an author's manipulation of *syuzhet* defamiliarises the underlying *fabula*, generating literary effect through technique rather than through the inherent interest of the events themselves.

4.2.2 Significance of Formalism

Russian Formalism's insistence on literariness and technique as the proper, scientifically analysable object of literary study – sharply bracketing off questions of biography, psychology, history, and morality that had dominated nineteenth-century criticism – exerted profound influence on subsequent twentieth-century criticism, most directly on the Prague Linguistic Circle and Structuralism (through the figure of Roman Jakobson, who carried Formalist methods westward), and more loosely on the roughly contemporaneous and methodologically kindred Anglo-American school of New Criticism.

4.3 New Criticism

4.3.1 Origins and Core Principles

New Criticism, the dominant Anglo-American critical movement from roughly the 1930s through the 1960s, particularly powerful in American university English departments, shares with Russian Formalism a fundamental commitment to close, rigorous attention to the literary text itself, considered as an autonomous, self-sufficient verbal artefact, rather than as a window onto the author's biography, psychology, or historical circumstances. Key figures include I. A. Richards and William Empson in England (whose *Practical Criticism*, 1929, and *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1930, respectively, laid important groundwork), and in America, John Crowe Ransom (whose 1941 book

The New Criticism gave the movement its name), Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, W. K. Wimsatt, and Monroe Beardsley.

The central methodological practice of New Criticism is close reading: an intensive, detailed analysis of a text's formal and verbal features – imagery, metaphor, paradox, irony, ambiguity, tone, and especially the patterned tensions and resolutions among these elements – conducted with minimal or no reference to external biographical, historical, or authorial-intentional evidence. The literary work is conceived as an organic unity (a concept with clear roots in Coleridge's Romantic organicism and ultimately in Aristotle's insistence on plot unity in the *Poetics*), a self-contained 'verbal icon' (Wimsatt's phrase) in which every formal element contributes to a single, unified, complex aesthetic effect.

4.3.2 The Intentional Fallacy and the Affective Fallacy

Two essays by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley articulate New Criticism's most influential and contested methodological principles. 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946) argues that the author's intended meaning, even where it can be established through external biographical or documentary evidence, is neither available nor relevant as the standard for interpreting or evaluating a literary work; what matters is the meaning actually achieved and embodied in the text's own words, which may exceed, differ from, or even contradict whatever the author consciously intended. 'The Affective Fallacy' (1949) similarly argues that a reader's emotional or psychological response to a text, however genuine, should not be confused with the text's objective meaning or value, since such responses are variable, subjective, and external to the formal properties of the work itself. Both essays insist on locating literary meaning and value strictly within the verbal structure of the text, sealed off from both the author's mind (intention) and the reader's mind (affect) – a methodological stance often summarised as a commitment to the text as an autonomous, self-sufficient object of study.

4.3.3 Key Analytical Concepts: Paradox, Irony, and Tension

Cleanth Brooks, in *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), argues that genuine poetic statement characteristically operates through paradox – the holding together of apparently contradictory ideas or attitudes in a single, unified utterance – and that irony (the discrepancy or tension between what is stated and what is meant, or between different possible meanings held simultaneously in suspension) is not an occasional poetic device but virtually structural to poetic language as such. The related concept of tension (developed by Allen Tate) describes the simultaneous presence, within a successful poem, of both abstract, denotative meaning (extension) and connotative, figurative meaning (intension), held in productive balance. New Critics generally privilege poems that achieve a complex equilibrium of such opposing forces – ambiguity, paradox, irony – resolved (or held in poised tension) within a single organic unity, considering this complexity itself a primary mark of literary excellence, in contrast to simpler, more univocal or straightforwardly didactic writing.

4.3.4 Significance and Limitations

New Criticism's legacy includes the enormous and lasting influence of close reading as a foundational pedagogical and critical skill, still taught as a basic method in English departments worldwide. Its deliberate isolation of the text from biographical, historical, and reader-response considerations, however, attracted increasing criticism from the 1960s onward (from reader-response critics, historicists, and later theorists) for what they characterised as an artificially narrow and ahistorical conception of literary meaning – a critique that helped open the way to the more historically, ideologically, and reader-oriented critical schools that proliferated in the later twentieth century, beyond the immediate scope of this syllabus.

4.4 Psychoanalytic Criticism

4.4.1 Freud and the Literary Text

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, developed from the 1890s through the early twentieth century, supplied literary criticism with an entirely new vocabulary and interpretive method centred on the unconscious mind, repression, and the symbolic encoding of forbidden desire. Freud's own essays on literature – including his analysis of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex and Shakespeare's Hamlet in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), where he proposes that the enduring power of the Oedipus myth and of Hamlet's paralysis derives from their unconscious dramatisation of the universal childhood 'Oedipus complex' (repressed desire for one parent and rivalry with the other) – established an influential model in which literary texts are read symptomatically, as encoding unconscious psychological material (desires, anxieties, conflicts) in disguised, displaced, or symbolic form, requiring interpretation analogous to dream analysis.

Key Freudian concepts regularly applied in psychoanalytic literary criticism include the unconscious (the repository of repressed wishes and memories inaccessible to conscious awareness), repression (the psychic mechanism by which unacceptable desires are excluded from consciousness), the Oedipus complex, the structural model of the psyche (id, ego, and superego, representing respectively primal instinctual drives, the rational mediating self, and internalised moral/social authority), and the mechanisms of displacement and condensation, by which unconscious material is transformed, in dreams and, by extension, in literary symbolism, into manifest images that both express and disguise their latent meaning.

4.4.2 Approaches within Psychoanalytic Criticism

Psychoanalytic criticism in this early-to-mid-twentieth-century phase generally operates in one or more of several overlapping modes: analysing fictional characters as if they were real psychological subjects exhibiting identifiable neuroses or complexes (as Freud does with Hamlet and Ernest Jones develops further in his extended study *Hamlet and Oedipus*, 1949); treating the literary work as an expression of the author's own unconscious psychological conflicts, accessible through careful symptomatic reading of the text (and sometimes supplemented by biographical evidence); and examining how literary symbolism, imagery, and narrative structure encode universal unconscious

patterns or anxieties shared by readers, which partly accounts for a text's broad emotional and imaginative power across different readers and eras.

Carl Jung, originally a close collaborator of Freud before their theoretical break, contributed a related but distinct concept highly influential in literary criticism: the archetype, a universal, primordial symbolic pattern (the hero, the shadow, the great mother, the wise old man, and so on) inherited, in Jung's theory, within a shared 'collective unconscious' common to all humanity, and recurring across diverse mythologies, religious traditions, and literary works regardless of direct cultural transmission. Jungian archetypal criticism, while distinct from strict Freudian analysis, is frequently grouped together with it under the broader heading of psychoanalytic or psychological criticism for survey purposes.

4.5 The Beginnings of Structuralist and Marxist Thought

4.5.1 Early Structuralism: Saussure's Legacy

Although Structuralism proper develops its fullest literary applications somewhat later (particularly from the 1950s through the 1970s, in figures such as Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, and Gérard Genette, generally beyond the immediate scope of this syllabus's mid-twentieth-century endpoint), its foundational intellectual resource, Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, belongs squarely to this 'Age of Interrogation' and decisively shapes the period's broader theoretical ferment. Saussure's key insight – that the linguistic sign is composed of an arbitrary relationship between a signifier (the sound-image or written form) and a signified (the associated mental concept), and that the meaning of any sign arises not from its inherent or natural connection to external reality but from its position of difference within the total system of the language (langue) – provided the methodological model that Formalists, and later full Structuralists, applied to literary texts: analysing them as systems of interrelated signs and conventions, governed by internal structural relationships, rather than as direct, transparent windows onto external reality, authorial psychology, or biographical fact.

4.5.2 Early Marxist Literary Thought

Marxist literary criticism, grounded in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's broader theory of historical materialism (the view that a society's economic 'base' – its mode of production and class relations – fundamentally shapes its cultural, political, legal, and intellectual 'superstructure,' including its literature), develops its early and influential twentieth-century literary applications particularly through the Hungarian theorist Georg Lukács, whose work (including *Studies in European Realism* and *The Historical Novel*) argues that great realist literature, especially the nineteenth-century novel, can reveal underlying historical and social totalities and class contradictions with unusual clarity, even when an individual author's explicit political views are conservative or reactionary (Lukács's celebrated example is Balzac). Early Marxist criticism in this period generally asks how a literary text's form and content reflect, reinforce, or potentially expose the ideological assumptions and class interests of the society that produced it, treating literature as inescapably embedded within, rather than autonomously detached from, concrete social and economic history – a stance that stands in

instructive methodological contrast to the contemporaneous, history-bracketing approaches of Formalism and New Criticism.

4.6 Comparative Overview of the Four Schools

Examination questions in this unit frequently require students to differentiate these schools along shared axes of comparison.

- **Object of study:** Formalism and New Criticism focus on the autonomous literary text itself, isolated from biography and history; Psychoanalytic criticism focuses on the unconscious psychological dimension of author, character, or reader encoded within the text; early Marxist and Structuralist thought focus respectively on the text's embeddedness within socio-economic history and on the text as a structured system of signs.
- **Treatment of the author:** Formalism and New Criticism deliberately set aside authorial intention (the Intentional Fallacy); Psychoanalytic criticism often treats the text as a symptomatic expression of the author's unconscious; early Marxist criticism treats the author as a historically and ideologically situated social agent, whose work may reveal more about class and history than the author's conscious intention alone.
- **Method:** Formalism and New Criticism rely on close reading of formal devices, technique, paradox, and ambiguity; Psychoanalytic criticism relies on symptomatic, interpretive reading analogous to dream analysis, applying concepts such as repression and the Oedipus complex; Structuralism (in its Saussurean linguistic foundations) relies on systemic analysis of signs and their internal relations; Marxist criticism relies on historical and ideological analysis connecting literary form and content to underlying economic and class relations.
- **Relationship to earlier criticism:** Formalism and New Criticism continue, in a more rigorous and theorised form, the Aristotelian and Coleridgean emphasis on organic unity; Psychoanalytic criticism radically departs from earlier criticism by displacing conscious authorial and readerly agency in favour of the unconscious; Marxist criticism extends, in a more systematically materialist direction, the Victorian concern (visible in Ruskin) with the social and moral implications of art.

4.7 Applying the Concepts: Four Readings of a Single Text

To consolidate the distinctions surveyed in this unit, consider briefly how each of the four schools might approach a single, well-known literary text – Shakespeare's Hamlet. A Formalist critic would attend to the play's distinctive technical devices: the defamiliarising effect of the play-within-the-play ('The Mousetrap'), which estranges the audience's relationship to the main dramatic action by reflecting it back in miniature; the manipulation of dramatic syuzhet, in which crucial events (the murder of old Hamlet) are withheld from direct presentation and instead narrated retrospectively by the Ghost, generating suspense and requiring the audience to actively reconstruct the underlying fabula.

A New Critic, working through close reading, would focus on the play's dense verbal texture – its recurring imagery of disease and corruption ('something is rotten in the state of Denmark'), the productive ambiguity and paradox of Hamlet's own language and behaviour (is his madness feigned, real, or genuinely undecidable?), and the way such verbal and thematic tensions are organically resolved, or held in poised balance, within the play's overall unified structure – deliberately setting aside any biographical speculation about Shakespeare's own intentions or psychological state.

A Psychoanalytic critic, following Freud's own brief remarks and Ernest Jones's extended Freudian study, would read Hamlet's notorious delay in avenging his father's murder as symptomatic of unconscious psychological conflict: Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius, on this reading, because Claudius has done precisely what Hamlet's own repressed Oedipal desire (to displace the father and possess the mother) unconsciously wished to do, producing a paralysing identification between avenger and murderer that conscious, rational motives alone cannot explain.

Finally, an early Marxist or historically materialist critic would situate the play within the social and political anxieties of its own historical moment – the crisis of legitimate succession and royal authority in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England, anxieties about usurpation, corrupted counsel, and the fragility of political order – reading Hamlet's personal crisis as inseparably entangled with a broader ideological crisis of the state, rather than as a purely private or purely formal-aesthetic matter. Holding these four readings side by side – formal device, verbal paradox, unconscious desire, historical ideology – vividly illustrates why this period of criticism is properly called an 'Age of Interrogation': the same text yields radically different, internally coherent meanings depending entirely on the critical questions brought to it.

Summary

Unit 4 surveys the methodologically diverse and self-interrogating criticism of the early-to-mid twentieth century. Russian Formalism establishes literariness and defamiliarising technique as literature's proper object of study, deliberately bracketing biography and history. Anglo-American New Criticism, sharing this commitment to the autonomous text, develops the practice of close reading and the principles of the Intentional and Affective Fallacies, analysing poems through paradox, irony, and organic tension. Psychoanalytic criticism, drawing on Freud's theory of the unconscious and the Oedipus complex (and, in Jung, the archetype and collective unconscious), reads literary texts symptomatically as encodings of repressed psychological material. Finally, the foundational structural linguistics of Saussure and the early Marxist criticism of theorists such as Lukács introduce, respectively, the systemic analysis of signs and the historical-materialist analysis of literature's embeddedness in class and economic relations – together constituting the diverse methodological ferment that defines twentieth-century criticism as an 'Age of Interrogation.'

Key Terms

- **Literariness (literaturnost)** – the Formalist concept of the specific formal qualities that distinguish literary from ordinary language.

- **Defamiliarisation (ostranenie)** – Shklovsky’s concept of art’s function in renewing perception by making the familiar strange.
- **Fabula and syuzhet** – the Formalist distinction between raw chronological story and the artistically arranged plot of the text.
- **Close reading** – the New Critical method of intensive, detailed textual analysis with minimal reference to external context.
- **Intentional Fallacy** – Wimsatt and Beardsley’s argument against using authorial intention as the standard of interpretation.
- **Affective Fallacy** – Wimsatt and Beardsley’s argument against using reader response as the standard of textual meaning or value.
- **Oedipus complex** – Freud’s theory of repressed childhood desire for one parent and rivalry with the other, used to interpret literary character and myth.
- **Archetype / collective unconscious** – Jung’s concept of universal, inherited symbolic patterns shared across human cultures.
- **Signifier and signified** – Saussure’s components of the linguistic sign, related arbitrarily and meaningful only through systemic difference.
- **Base and superstructure** – the Marxist model in which a society’s economic structure shapes its cultural and ideological production, including literature.

Likely Examination Questions

1. Explain the concept of defamiliarisation in Russian Formalism with reference to Shklovsky’s ‘Art as Technique.’
2. Discuss the New Critical practice of close reading. What are the Intentional and Affective Fallacies, and why did New Critics consider them important to avoid?
3. Examine the application of Freudian psychoanalytic theory to literary interpretation, with reference to the Oedipus complex.
4. Write a note on the foundational contribution of Saussurean linguistics to twentieth-century literary theory.
5. How does early Marxist literary criticism (e.g. Lukács) differ methodologically from Formalism and New Criticism?
6. Why is the twentieth century described as an ‘Age of Interrogation’ in literary criticism? Discuss with reference to at least two critical schools.

Course Conclusion: Synthesis and Revision

Having moved across roughly twenty-four centuries of Western literary thought, it is worth pausing to consider the larger pattern that connects the four units of this course, since synthesis questions asking students to trace a single concept across the entire syllabus (Course Outcome COS5) are a recurring and high-value examination format.

A. The Full Timeline at a Glance

Period	Movement	Key Figures	Defining Concepts
5th–4th c. BCE	Classical Greece	Plato (Republic); Aristotle (Poetics)	Imitation as removed copy vs. imitation as universal truth; catharsis
1st c. BCE	Augustan Rome	Horace (Ars Poetica)	Dulce et utile; decorum; the patient labour of art
16th–17th c.	Renaissance – Early Neoclassicism	Castelvetro; French Académie	Codification of the dramatic unities
1660s–1700s	Restoration / Augustan Neoclassicism	Dryden; Boileau	Reasoned comparative criticism; ‘Nature methodized’
1687–1704	The Quarrel	Perrault; Fontenelle; Temple; Swift	Ancients vs. Moderns; Battle of the Books
1711–1765	High Neoclassicism	Pope; Johnson	Essay on Criticism; Preface to Shakespeare
1798–1830s	Romantic Revolt	Wordsworth; Coleridge; Shelley; Keats	Emotion, imagination, organic form, Negative Capability
1830s–1900	Victorian Compromise	Arnold; Ruskin; Pater	Disinterestedness; touchstones; culture; art for art’s sake

1914–1920s	Russian Formalism	Shklovsky; Eikhenbaum; Jakobson	Literariness; defamiliarisation; fabula/syuzhet
1920s–1960s	New Criticism	Richards; Empson; Brooks; Wimsatt & Beardsley	Close reading; Intentional and Affective Fallacies; paradox
1900 onward	Psychoanalytic Criticism	Freud; Jung; Ernest Jones	Unconscious; Oedipus complex; archetype
1916 / 1920s–1930s	Early Structuralist & Marxist Thought	Saussure; Lukács	Signifier/signified; base and superstructure

B. Tracing a Single Concept Across the Syllabus: The Case of ‘Imitation’

One especially productive way to revise the entire course is to trace a single recurring concept across all four units, exactly as Course Outcome COS5 requires. Imitation (mimesis) offers the clearest example, since it is the very term with which the course begins and which continues, often beneath the surface, to inform later criticism.

For Plato, imitation is the central indictment against poetry: art imitates the physical world, which itself merely imitates the eternal Forms, leaving poetry twice removed from ultimate truth. Aristotle redeems the same term by relocating its object from particular physical things to universal patterns of human action, making poetry, through imitation rightly understood, more philosophical than history. Neoclassical criticism narrows imitation further into the imitation of classical models themselves, on the theory that the ancients had already perfected the imitation of Nature; to imitate Homer or Virgil correctly was considered the surest path to imitating Nature correctly. Romantic criticism reacts sharply against this entire mimetic tradition, replacing imitation of an external Nature or external classical models with the expressive, world-creating power of the individual imagination – Abrams’s shift from mirror to lamp. Victorian criticism, while still valuing imaginative expression, reintroduces an implicit return to something like imitation in a new guise: Arnold’s touchstones require the critic to compare new work against the achieved excellence of past masters, an evaluative practice with clear echoes of Neoclassical imitation of authoritative models, even though Arnold’s underlying aesthetic remains broadly post-Romantic. Finally, twentieth-century criticism complicates the concept yet again: Formalism and New Criticism are largely uninterested in imitation as a category at all, preferring to examine the text’s internal formal devices in their own right, while psychoanalytic criticism reframes ‘imitation’ at the level of unconscious psychic representation – the literary text imitates not external reality but internal, repressed psychological conflict.

This single trace – from Plato’s metaphysical suspicion, through Aristotle’s philosophical rehabilitation, Neoclassical authoritative modelling, Romantic rejection in favour of expression, Victorian quasi-return through the touchstone method, to the eventual twentieth-century turn toward text-internal form or unconscious psychic representation – offers a complete, examinable model answer for any question requiring synthesis across the whole syllabus, and the same method can be applied to other recurring concepts such as the role of the author, the function of emotion, or the relationship between art and morality.

C. Master Glossary

The following glossary consolidates key terms from across all four units for quick revision.

- ✓ **Mimesis** – imitation; the foundational and continually contested concept of what literature represents and how.
- ✓ **Catharsis** – the purgation or clarification of pity and fear achieved through tragedy (Aristotle).
- ✓ **Hamartia, peripeteia, anagnorisis** – tragic error, reversal of fortune, and recognition; the mechanics of Aristotelian plot.
- ✓ **Decorum and the Three Unities** – Neoclassical principles of propriety and dramatic construction.
- ✓ **Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes** – the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns over relative literary superiority.
- ✓ **Nature methodized** – Pope’s formula identifying classical rules with the rational order of Nature itself.
- ✓ **Mimetic versus expressive theory** – Abrams’s distinction between art as reflective mirror and art as creative lamp.
- ✓ **Fancy versus Imagination; organic form; Negative Capability** – core Romantic concepts of creative process (Coleridge, Keats).
- ✓ **Disinterestedness; touchstones; sweetness and light; art for art’s sake** – core Victorian critical concepts (Arnold, Pater).
- ✓ **Literariness; defamiliarisation; fabula/syuzhet** – core Russian Formalist concepts (Shklovsky, Jakobson).
- ✓ **Close reading; Intentional Fallacy; Affective Fallacy; paradox and tension** – core New Critical concepts (Wimsatt, Beardsley, Brooks).
- ✓ **Unconscious; Oedipus complex; archetype; collective unconscious** – core psychoanalytic concepts (Freud, Jung).
- ✓ **Signifier/signified; base/superstructure** – foundational Structuralist and Marxist concepts (Saussure, Lukács).

D. Comprehensive Examination Preparation Strategy

Given the breadth of this syllabus, spanning nearly twenty-five centuries of critical thought in a single semester, an effective revision strategy should proceed in three stages. First, master each unit's core definitions and primary-text quotations exactly as presented above, since examiners frequently reward precise, accurately attributed terminology (Course Outcome COS6 explicitly tests this). Second, practise the comparative exercises provided at the end of each unit – Plato versus Aristotle, Romantic versus Victorian, the four twentieth-century schools – since 'compare and contrast' questions are a dominant format across this paper's likely question bank. Third, and most importantly for the highest-value synthesis questions, practise tracing a single concept (imitation, the role of the author, the relationship between emotion and reason, or the social function of literature) across all four units in a connected, chronological argument, using the worked example above as a model. Students should also ensure they can apply at least one critical framework from each unit to a literary text of their own choosing, since Course Outcome COS5 explicitly requires the application, not merely the recitation, of these theories.

Final Note

Literary criticism, as this course demonstrates, is not a fixed body of settled doctrine but a continuing argument, in which each generation of critics responds to, modifies, or overturns the assumptions of those before it – Aristotle answering Plato, the Romantics overturning Neoclassical rule, the Victorians tempering Romantic individualism with renewed social seriousness, and the twentieth century interrogating the very foundations on which earlier criticism rested. Understanding this course, therefore, means understanding not simply a sequence of isolated theories but a long, connected conversation about what literature is, what it does, and why it matters – a conversation in which contemporary readers, including students encountering these texts for the first time, are invited to participate.