



THE TASK OF LITERARY THEORY: SMALL SCALE ANALYSIS OR UNIVERSAL GENERALIZATIONS?

Fatima Umar

English Department
Gombe State University
fateeuu@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the two long-existing contending positions in the task of Literary Theory: whether it should restrict itself to the analysis of specific objects or go beyond that by providing universal generalisations that focus on large scale projects. Having examined various views of scholars, writers and researchers and critics, like Arnold, Richards, Waugh and Bressler, the paper traces the root of literary theory and is able to identify some connections between the two arguments. The study finds that both approaches play significant roles within the contexts they are placed. Both ways are aimed at providing, promoting and upholding the value and relevance of literary theory in particular and the world at large to a greater height. Therefore, the study concludes that both approaches should be used where necessary as there is a contentious relationship between the two that unveils conceptual and empirical yardsticks for analysis. Doing away with one could create an aporia that may lead to the return of the repressed.

Keywords: Theory, literature, criticism, methodology, textual analysis

Introduction

Literary theory has been surrounded by concepts like negotiation, debates and renewal all in an attempt to define literature and its functions in the society. Literature has been defined in various ways by different scholars, and each adopts a particular angle from which they approach the subject. From its formal recognition in Plato and Aristotle, to its modern evolvement in Poststructural studies, Literary theory has constantly redefined its focus and approach. The core of this research is to argue on whether literary theory should focus on close analysis of texts or universal generalizations about literature.

Literature Review

To understand the core business of modern literary criticism, it is important to take a brief look at the nature of philosophical inquiry. According to Rorty (1991), philosophy itself ‘swings back and forth, on the one hand, a self-image modelled ‘normal science’ that attempts to address ‘small-scale problems’ on a definite, one-at-a-time basis, and on the other, ‘a self-image’ modelled supporting this on ‘revolutionary science’ where grounded philosophical problems are discarded and philosophers employ novel vocabulary to describe these phenomena (p. 78). Rorty finds that in reality, literary theory is more akin to the latter method than the former. In this light, he posits that for a literary critic ‘to see the great big picture, tell a great big story,’ they must ‘engage in the same sort of canon-formation in respect to philosophers as he or she does in respect to novelists or poets or fellow critics’ (pp. 78-79).

In his *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present An Introduction* Habib submits that the word ‘criticism’ originates from the Greek, meaning ‘judge’, thus, Criticism has been defined by Mathew Arnold as a ‘disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas’. I. A. Richards sees it as ‘the endeavour to discriminate between experiences and to evaluate them (viii). ‘To Hasse, it is ‘the art of judging with knowledge and propriety of an object or performance’ (p. 29). To Frederick C. Crews, literary criticism is ‘the seasoned consideration of literary works and issues; the interpretation of its meaning and judgment of quality.’ In this light, literary criticism is an effort to understand literature through placing it within some larger framework. This framework can be understood as the principles which inform how critics make sense of literary objects. This

understanding underpins Rice and Waugh's submission that 'all forms of criticism are founded upon a theory, or an admixture of theories', whether this is consciously acknowledged or not, hence, "there is no critical art that can transcend theory' (p. 2). Thus, Gregory Castle sums up at the beginning of the *Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* (2007) where he states that "literary theory is distinct from literary criticism, the latter being the practical application of the former" (p. 7). To understand this, one may need to get familiarized with literary theory itself.

Methodology

The research adopts qualitative approach to examine the contending views on literary theory. Primarily, it relies on critical publications on literary criticism and theory including Charles Bressler's *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, M. A. R. Habib's *A History of Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present* and Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Other secondary data sources studied include literary texts, (like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ojoniyi's *Our Wife Has Gone Mad*,) journal articles, unpublished lecture notes and scholarly essays. Besides, the study is strongly comparative in nature, therefore it draws from arguments, assumptions as well as ideological beliefs of various literary schools to buttress the connection and disconnection between the two contending views. It also borrows from other fields of study like philosophy, sociology and history for a better understanding of the basic arguments.

Contending Views

According to Eagleton (2008), 'Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or imaginative, but because it uses language in particular ways. Based on this theory, literature is a kind of writing which in the words of the Russian critic, Roman Jakobson, represents 'an organized violence committed on ordinary speech' (p. 2). One immediately notes that literature is here presented as being essentially about language. Therefore, the concern with the analysis of a work of literature either through modern criticism or theory might as well focus on language. However, the argument raised by Arnold on the object of Literature(poetry) been the best that has been thought and said in the world cannot be underscored either. Accordingly, it enables one to focus not only on the language and violence committed on it but also on the cultural and moral values contained. According to Ibrahim Bello:

Theory is the sum ...of concepts, principles, paradigms, and strategies that both guide critical practice and the methods and models of explanation that theory deploys in its own conceptualizations of the field of experience and speculation about the 'nature' of its object of knowledge. (p.5)

With this, one can deduce that literary theory, unlike criticisms that is the analysis and evaluation of literature, comprises those philosophical terminologies that are used to construct and study literature and its analytical points of focus. Thus, its development is characterised by the creation of different techniques revolving around the assumption that the meaning of text can be carefully obtained through interpretation. Aligning with this is how Tanimu (2008) describes literary theory as the evaluation of the functions, the tenets, and the properties of literature using inputs from texts and at times contributing to such academic field as History, Psychology, Anthropology, Philosophy and the natural sciences. Thus, this unveils a symbiotic state of literary theory which has opened up variety of options and approaches to interpretations all of which are bound by the centrality of textualization in literary creativity.

Accordingly, the symbiosis in literary theory fundamentally leads us to the methodological *either/- or* in the question of literary theory, meaning: should literary theory dwell on unveiling of universal truths or preoccupy itself with examination of specific literary objects? While Rorty avers that Literary Theory should do 'small job' by canvassing its margins within the genre of literary analysis. The task lies in the theories' ability to shape the thoughts of the author towards producing innovative poets. These poets will be able to produce powerful vocabularies that aim at reshaping and changing the world towards its sustainability. Waugh on her part argues that Theory should paint the 'big picture' by offering universal generalisations on projects beyond the level of genre analysis. That is, theory searching for scientific proof or condition of possibility of things, especially from the metaphysical picture beyond the lenses of genre. This may enable a 'transcendental' exploration of human desires. According to Bressler:

Traditionally, literary critics involve themselves in either theoretical or practical criticism. Theoretical criticism formulates theories, principles, and tenets regarding the nature and value of art. By citing general aesthetic and moral principles of art, theoretical criticism provides the necessary

framework for practical criticism. Practical criticism (known also as applied criticism) then applies the theories and tenets of theoretical criticism to a particular work—*Huckleberry Finn*, for example. It is the practical critic who defines the standards of taste and explains, evaluates, or justifies a particular piece of literature. A further distinction is made between the practical critic who posits that there is one and only one theory or set of principles a critic may utilize when evaluating a literary work—the absolutist critic—and the relativistic critic, who employs various and even contradictory theories in critiquing a piece of literature. The basis, however, for either kind of critic, or for any form of criticism, is literary theory. Without theory, practical criticism could not exist” (pp. 3-4).

From the above, it would seem unnecessary to discard either of these grounded approaches to the study of literature, to literary theory. What would be more useful is to retain the guide which draws a line between the ‘small job’ on the one hand, and the ‘big task’ on the other, in the description of the given practice at any point in time. When theory sets ground principles about the universe, then the better description of this art would be the universal approach. When critical studies set grand schemes as derived or observed from a general study of literature, or of the texts of any particular author, period, or geographical location, or a combination of these grids of literature, then the apt description for the craft would be small job. A close reading of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* for instance, reveals Okonkwo as a tragic hero whose personal ambition and fear of weakness lead to his downfall. However, a universal approach to the same text (*Things Fall Apart*) unveils issues related to masculinity, identity and patriarchy. This form of criticism is more similar to philosophy, since it draws out principles that make universal comments about reality, society, and literary objects, providing basic yardsticks of measurements. The two ideas seem two sides of a coin that support each other. Similarly, Bode Ojoniyi’s *Our Wife Has Gone Mad* deals with the issue of marriage, polygamy and polyandry through the characters of Daniela and her three husbands. However, the play’s wider picture can be seen as a microcosm of the African society where the conflict between tradition and modernity, gender politics as well as local and global identities are undergoing negotiations.

On the other hand, there is the specific analysis of a given text. In this practice, usually, the critic deploys a set of principles from Literary Theory as has been described above, and based on its given tenets, makes descriptions and judgments on the events, characters, settings, quality, originality, and among other things in the given text. This gives room for a closer and clearer understanding of the postulations and presuppositions existing specifically within a particular theoretical school, compared to the universal approach. In addition, the ‘small job’ task motivates the critic to read and critique more literary works. This aligns with Ferianda’s (2017) submission that Literary theories and literary texts are the same as two sides of a coin. Her primary focus is on structuralism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and psychoanalytics theories and how they give different meaning to the text under study. Thus, Ferianda concludes that theory and text should not be separated as they both help its readers to understand the application. Similarly, Sekar (2024) argues on the indispensable role of literary theory in academic research by conducting a comparative analysis which examines the influence of theory on methodologies, interpretations, and outcomes. Sekar’s paper systematically reviews scholarly works across key literary theories—such as Feminist, Postcolonialit, and Structuralist and how these frameworks have shaped the evolution of literary analysis over time. Relatively supporting this idea is the presupposition by Bressler (1993) that:

literary theory assumes that there is no such thing as an innocent reading of a text, whether our responses are emotional and spontaneous or well reasoned and highly structured, all such interactions with and about a text are based on some underlined factors that cause us to respond to a text in a particular fashion. What elicits these responses or how a reader makes sense of a text is at the heart of literary theory (17).

The existence of divergent approaches to criticism means that there is no singular, correct way to approach literary objects. I. A. Richards has stated that criticism is impossible ‘without some understanding of the nature of experience, or without theories of valuation and communication. Such principles as applied in criticism must be taken from these more fundamental studies’ (viii). In other words, the *big job* of criticism provides the umbrella, or the yardsticks, by which the *small job* is conducted. The two need each other. Pure theorization of

universal truths without application of these principles to some specific literary object would reduce literary criticism to pure philosophy. For instance, New critics argue that the search for meaning within a text's structure can be achieved by identifying the tensions and conflicts that must be resolved into a harmonious whole. Interestingly, even a surface level understanding or first reading of a poem or text shows a reconciliation of a conflict of opposing meanings and tensions (Bressler).

However, Waugh observes that there is the real risk that when we insist that theory must be applied to text in every instance of literary analysis, theory could become:

a mere genuflection to authority, rather than engaged and painstaking argument; an inflexible, a priori, interpretative framework is then imposed on the primary text. Reading becomes as predictable as a well-established scientific process. Without the resistance to theory, and the close and careful reading of the text against its theorizations, there is that wearisome sense that one knows what one is going to say about the text beforehand, with the result that, instead of reading, engagement consists simply in looking for suitable illustration for an argument and interpretation that is already written. (p. 58)

To deal with this problem, the reading (and interpretation process) must itself be creative even as it conserves the guiding framework of the given approach. The reading process should therefore borrow from Arnold's idea of 'making the familiar unfamiliar' in order to bring out the fictionality of fiction.

There is a fundamental basis for the recommendation by this study that instead of picking one of the two methods under view in a case of *either/or*. It would be better to go for a *both/and* solution to the methodical problem of literary theory. Bressler (1996) has stated that 'How we arrive at meaning in fiction is determined by our past experiences' (p. 4). The problem here is with what the word *experience* is referred to in this context. Is it the experience of the individual, or that of their community, nation, or indeed the universe? The individual experience is derived from other experiences as T.S Eliot in his essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' posits that there is no poet or artist of any kind, that has his complete meaning alone, but in relation to the dead poets

and artists. Impliedly, Eliot's submission here unveils the interconnectedness of poems, and most importantly, theories in meaning making. Therefore, all experience contributes to the meaning-making framework of everyone, directly or indirectly, and this would include the experience of reading. Since literary texts operate simultaneously at micro and macro levels of analysis, close reading reveals the sub segments of texts including characterization, structure, and language. The theoretical generalization on the other part situates these elements within broader cultural, ideological, and philosophical frameworks.

In the forward to *Perspectives on Conducting and Reporting Research in Humanities*, Dabire (2017) avers that:

...research remains the fulcrum around which knowledge evolves and revolves; and it is also a platform on which solutions are proffered to a myriad of problems and knotty issues. Research... is a hallmark of the individual's scholar- as well as that of societal growth and development; hence, its indispensability in the quest for meaningful and positive change in all facets of human life is undoubted (iv).

By utilizing the two approaches together, therefore, the literary critic conducts a more complete and organised work. The interconnection between the two approaches does not only enhance interpretive depth but also ensures the continued relevance of literary studies in addressing both textual and societal concerns. The findings from the contending arguments is thus summarised in the table below:

Analytical Dimension	Small-Scale Analysis ("Small Job")	Universal Generalization ("Big Task")
Primary Focus	Micro-level textual features, close reading, syntax, and genre specifics.	Macro-level ideological, historical, philosophical, and structural frameworks.
Methodological Goal	To uncover variations, contradictions, and distinct values within a specific text.	To formulate overarching tenets regarding the nature, value, and conditions of art.
Key Theoretical Allies	New Criticism, Formalism, Structuralism.	Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Philosophical Aesthetics.
Synthesis (The Paper's Stance)	Indispensable Practical Application: Provides empirical textual grounding to prevent theory from becoming pure philosophy.	Indispensable Umbrella: Provides the conceptual framework and yardsticks that guide micro-analysis.

Conclusion

The study has examined the fundamental debate on what constitutes the more appropriate approach to conducting literary criticism. The two major approaches being the universalist and the specific have been briefly explained, and the paper goes on to propose that the two approaches need each other, hence should be maintained side by side, the one (theoretical criticism) informing and

forming the basis for conducting the other (practical criticism). While the universal approach gives room for conceptual reviews towards wider understanding, the small-scale approach enables ground for empirical studies and analysis of specific texts. The interconnection between the two therefore, does not just show the indispensable worth of (theoretical and practical) theory but unveils its strength in further researches within several disciplines in the humanities.

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