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WHAT IS EVALUATION?

Judgment, to estimate things at their true value.

—Samuel Johnson

For all right judgment of any man or thing it is useful, nay, essential, to see his good qualities before pronouncing on his bad.

—Thomas Carlyle

To set up as a critic is to set up as a judge of values. For the arts are inevitably and quite apart from any intention of the artist an appraisal of existence. Matthew Arnold, when he said that poetry is a criticism of life, was saying something so obvious that it is constantly overlooked. The artist is concerned with the record and perpetuation of the experiences which seem to him most worth having.

—I. A. Richards

Criticism . . . must always profess an end in view, which, roughly speaking, appears to be the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste.

—T. S. Eliot

You can never draw the line between aesthetic criticism and moral and social criticism. . . . You start with literary criticism, and however rigorous an aesthete you may be, you are over the frontier into something else sooner or later. The best you can do is to accept these conditions and know what you are doing when you are doing it.

—T. S. Eliot

If you judge, investigate.

—Seneca

CRITICISM AND EVALUATION

Although in ordinary usage *criticism* implies finding fault, and therefore implies evaluation—this story is weak—in fact most literary criticism is *not* concerned with evaluation. Rather, it is chiefly concerned with *interpretation* (the setting forth of meaning) and with *analysis* (examination of relationships among the parts, or of causes and effects). For instance, an interpretation may argue that in *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller (1949) Willy Loman is the victim of a cruel capitalistic economy, and an analysis may show how the symbolic setting of the play (a stage direction tells us that "towering, angular shapes" surround the salesman's house) contributes to the meaning. In our discussion of "What Is Literature?" we saw that an analysis of Robert Frost's "The Span of Life" (page 91) called attention to the contrast between the meter of the first line (relatively uneven or irregular, with an exceptional number of heavy stresses) and the meter of the second (relatively even and jingling). The analysis also called attention to the contrast between the content of the first line (the old dog) and the second (the speaker's memory of a young dog):

> The old dog barks backward without getting up.
> I can remember when he was a pup.

In our discussion we did not worry about whether this poem deserves an A, B, or C, nor about whether it was better or worse than some other poem by Frost, or by some other writer. For the most part, critics assume that the works they are writing about have value and are good enough to merit attention, and so critics largely concern themselves with other matters.

Evaluative Language and the Canon

Still, some critical writing is indeed concerned with evaluation—with saying that works are good or bad, dated or classic, major or minor. The language need not be as explicit as these words are; evaluation can also be conveyed through words such as *moving, successful, effective, important,* or, on the other hand, *tedious, unsuccessful, weak,* and *trivial.* In reviews of plays, books, movies, musical and dance performances, and films, professional critics usually devote much of their space to evaluating the work or the performance, or both. The reviewer seeks, finally, to tell readers whether to buy a book or a ticket—or to save their money and their time.

In short, although in our independent reading we read what we like, and we need not argue that one work is better than another, the issue of evaluation is all around us.

ARE THERE CRITICAL STANDARDS?

One approach to evaluating a work of literature, or, indeed, to evaluating anything, is to rely on personal taste. This approach is evident in a statement such as "I don't know anything about modern art, but I know what I like." The idea is old, at least as old as the Roman saying, *De gustibus non est disputandum* (There is no disputing tastes).

If we say, "This is a good work," or "This book is greater than that book," are we saying anything beyond "I like this" and "I like this better than that"? Are all expressions of evaluation really nothing more than expressions of taste? Most people believe that if there are such things as works of art, or works of literature, there must be standards by which they can be evaluated, just as most other things are evaluated by standards. The standards for evaluating a kitchen knife, for instance, are perfectly clear. It ought to cut cleanly, it ought not to need frequent sharpening, and it ought to feel comfortable in the hand. We may also want it to look nice and to be inexpensive, rustproof, and so on, but in any case we can easily state our standards. Similarly, there are agreed-on standards for evaluating figure skating, gymnastics, fluency in language, and so on.

But what are the standards for evaluating literature? In earlier pages we have implied one standard: In a good work of literature, all of the parts contribute to the whole, making a unified work. Some people would add that mere unity is not enough; a work of high quality needs not only to be unified but needs also to be complex. The writer offers a "performance in words" (Frost's words, again), and when we read, we can see if the writer has successfully kept all of the Indian clubs in the air. If the stated content of the poem is mournful, yet the meter jingles, we can probably say that the performance is unsuccessful; at least one Indian club is clattering on the floor.

Here are some of the standards commonly set forth:

- Personal taste
- Truth, realism
- Moral content
- Aesthetic qualities, such as unity

Let's look at some of these in detail.

Morality and Truth as Standards

"It is always a writer's duty to make the world better." Thus writes Samuel Johnson (1709–84), in 1765, in his "Preface to Shakespeare." In

this view, *morality* plays a large role; a story that sympathetically treats lesbian or gay love is, from a traditional Judeo-Christian perspective, probably regarded as a bad story, or at least not as worthy as a story that celebrates heterosexual married love. On the other hand, a gay or lesbian critic, or anyone not committed to traditional Judeo-Christian values, might regard the story highly because, in such a reader's view, it helps to educate readers and thereby does something "to make the world better."

But there are obvious problems. For one thing, a gay or lesbian story might strike even a reader with traditional values as a work that is effectively told, with believable and memorable characters, whereas a story of heterosexual married love might be unbelievable, awkwardly told, trite, or sentimental. How much value does one give to the ostensible content of the story, the obvious moral or morality, and how much value does one give to the artistry exhibited in telling the story?

People differ greatly about moral (and religious) issues. Edward FitzGerald's (1809–83) translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859) suggests that God doesn't exist, or—perhaps worse—if He does exist, He doesn't care about us. That God does not exist is a view held by many moral people; it is also a view rejected by many moral people. The issue then may become a matter of *truth*. Does the value of the poem depend on which view is right? In fact, does a reader have to subscribe to FitzGerald's view to enjoy (and to evaluate highly) the following stanza from the poem, in which FitzGerald suggests that the pleasures of this world are the only paradise that we can experience?

A book of verses underneath the bough,
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread—and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness—
Oh, wilderness were paradise enow!

Some critics can give high value to a literary work only if they share the beliefs, if they think that the work corresponds to reality. They measure the work against their vision of the truth.

Other readers can highly value a work of literature that expresses views as they do not believe, arguing that literature does not require us to believe in its views. Rather, this theory claims, literature gives a reader a strong sense of *what it feels like* to hold certain views—even though the reader does not share those views.

Take, for instance, a lyric poem in which Christina Rossetti (1830–94), a devout Anglican, expresses both spiritual numbness and spiritual hope. Here is one stanza from "A Better Resurrection":

My life is like a broken bowl,
A broken bowl that cannot hold
One drop of water for my soul
Or cordial in the scorching cold;
Cast in the fire the perished thing;
Melt and remould it, till it be
A royal cup for Him, my King:
O Jesus, drink of me.

One need not be an Anglican suffering a crisis to find this poem of considerable interest. It offers insight into a state of mind, and the truth or falsity of religious belief is not at issue. Similarly, one can argue that although *The Divine Comedy* (c. 1310–14) by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) is a deeply Roman Catholic work, the non-Catholic reader can read it with interest and pleasure because of (for example) its rich portrayal of a wide range of characters, the most famous of whom perhaps are the pathetic lovers Paolo and Francesca. In Dante's view, they are eternally damned because they were unrepentant adulterers, but a reader need not share this belief.

Other Ways to Think about Truth and Realism

Other solutions to the problem of whether a reader must share a writer's beliefs have been offered. One extreme view says that beliefs are irrelevant, because literature has nothing to do with truth. In this view, a work of art does not correspond to anything "outside" itself, that is, to anything in the real world. If a work of art has any "truth," it is only in the sense of being internally consistent. Thus Shakespeare's *Macbeth* isn't making assertions about reality. *Macbeth* has nothing to do with the history of Scotland, just as (in this view) Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* has nothing to do with the history of Rome, although Shakespeare borrowed some of his material from history books. These tragedies are worlds in themselves—not to be judged against historical accounts of Scotland or Rome—and we are interested in the characters in the plays only as they exist *in the plays*. We may require that the characters be consistent, believable, and engaging, but we cannot require that they correspond to historical figures. Literary works are neither true nor false; they are only (when successful) coherent and interesting. The poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) perhaps had in mind something along these lines when he said that you can refute a philosopher, but you cannot refute the song of sixpence. And indeed

"Sing a song of sixpence, / Pocket full of rye," has endured for a couple of centuries, perhaps partly because it has nothing to do with truth or falsity; it has created its own engaging world.

And yet one can object, offering a commonsense response: Surely when we see a play, or read an engaging work of literature, whether it is old or new, we feel that somehow the work says something about the life around us, the real world. True, some of what we read—let's say, detective fiction—is chiefly fanciful; we read it to test our wits, or to escape, or to kill time. But most literature seems to be connected to life. This commonsense view, that literature is related to life, has an ancient history, and in fact almost everyone in the Western world believed it from the time of the ancient Greeks until the nineteenth century, and many people—including authors and highly skilled readers—still believe it today.

Certainly a good deal of literature, most notably the realistic short story and the novel, is devoted to giving a detailed picture that at least *looks like* the real world. One reason we read the fiction of Kate Chopin is to find out what "the real world" of Creole New Orleans in the late nineteenth century was like—as seen through Chopin's eyes. (One need not be a Marxist to believe, with Karl Marx, that one learns more about Industrial England from the novels of Dickens [1812–70] and Mrs. Gaskell [1810–65] than from economic treatises.) Writers of stories, novels, and plays are concerned about giving plausible, indeed precise and insightful, images of the relationships between people. Writers of lyric poems presumably are specialists in presenting human feelings, such as the experience of love or of the loss of faith. And we are invited to compare the writer's created world to the world that we live in, perhaps to be reminded that our own lives can be richer than they are.

The novelist D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) offers a relevant comment in the ninth chapter of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). He is talking about novels, but perhaps we can extend his view to all works of literature:

> It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives. And here lies the vast importance of the novel, properly handled. It can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead. Therefore, the novel, properly handled, can reveal the most secret places of life.

In Lawrence's view, we can evaluate literature in terms of its moral effect on the reader; the good novel, Lawrence claims, leads us into worlds—human relationships—that deserve our attention and leads us away from "things gone dead," presumably relationships and values—whether political, moral, or religious—that no longer deserve to survive.

Realism is not the writer's only tool. In *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) Swift gives us a world of Lilliputians, people about six inches tall. Is his book pure fancy, unrelated to life? Not at all. We perceive that the Lilliputians are (except for their size) pretty much like ourselves, and we realize that their tiny stature is an image of human pettiness, an *un*realistic device that helps us to see the real world more clearly.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

When you draft an essay, and when you revise it through successive drafts, imagine that you are explaining your position to someone who, quite reasonably, wants to hear the *reasons* that have led you to your conclusions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Most of the reference works cited on pages 95–96 include entries on *evaluation*. But for additional short discussions, see Chapter 18 ("Evaluation") in René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (1962); Chapter 5 ("On Value-Judgments") in Northrop Frye, *The Stubborn Structure* (1970); and Chapter 4 ("Evaluation") in John M. Ellis, *The Theory of Literary Criticism* (1974). For a longer discussion, see Chapters 10 and 11 ("Critical Evaluation" and "Aesthetic Value") in Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (1958). Also of interest is Joseph Strelka, ed., *Problems of Literary Evaluation* (1969). In Strelka's collection, you may find it best to begin with the essays by George Boas, Northrop Frye, and David Daiches, and then to browse in the other essays. Still useful is *The Intent of the Critic* (1941), ed. Donald A. Stauffer, which includes essays by Edmund Wilson, Norman Foerster, John Crowe Ransom, and W. H. Auden that explore the relationship between criticism and evaluation. For examples of literary judgment making and the critical evaluation of poetry, we recommend Richard Howard, *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950*, enl. ed. (1980); Helen Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (1980); Vendler, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (1988); and William Logan, *Reputations of the Tongue: On Poets and Poetry* (1999).