

**Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)**  
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**Introduction to Peter Barry's Literary Theory**

Hello, and welcome to today's session of the course, Literary Criticism. As mentioned in the previous session, we shall be looking at the introduction to *Beginning Theory* written by Peter Barry and this is one of the seminal texts that are used in the contemporary to understand the transition from what we call as literary criticism towards literary theory.

So the introduction gives us a very succinct historical and philosophical background towards this transition. And this is a text, this is an introduction which I think is useful as we enter our chronological and continuous discussions on Literary Criticism. The foundations of western critical theory, as we have noted, it had been laid from the Greco- Roman times and they continued to progress, as and when the history of English literature progressed.

So it is very important for us to understand how these foundational elements have been seen together as a continuum, and what are the common threads, what are the common trajectories that hold them together.

So fundamentally, when we look at Literary Criticism, it is about understanding, it is about reading what people have written about literature. It is not really about reading the literary texts, it is not just about reading what has been written by authors and artists, it is also about reading what has been written about literature. So why do we have to read what has been written about literature? What is this about to do in our understanding of literature? Why can't we just read literature for what it is and use our own instincts in order to understand, in order to interpret? So we need to have some clarity, some grounding on this before we move ahead.

So the fundamental and important thing is to identify the integral connection of literature with other disciplines such as philosophy, religion, politics, and even morality. And if we go through the history of English literature and thereby through the history of English literary criticism as well, we find that these aspects have always been interrelated. There are interconnections that we need to identify and the understanding, the historical, as well as the literal understanding of the text, depends largely on these interconnections that we begin to identify.

And all of these aspects, they are also related, very directly related to all aspects of human life that also accentuates the need to situate them within a proper context. And literary criticism and these various approaches, they also enable us to classify different texts according to genres, according to traditions and they also enable us to do a sort of a comparative assessment. Because it will not be appropriate if we just evaluate a text on the basis of what exactly it is, but a comparative evaluation is important for an assessment, for a more objective kind of an evaluation.

And it also helps us to interpret and also to contextualize the meanings and the subtexts and the hidden meanings, which are part of almost all kinds of literary productions. And it is important for us to keep in mind that it would be impossible for us to arrive at any kind of objective estimation independently, independent of the text or independent of the other supportive reading yardsticks and frameworks.

So, literary criticism and its understanding is extremely important for us to arrive at an objective estimation of any literary text and it also gives us a comparative assessment, a comparative understanding which will also accentuate the nature and the quality of our evaluation. And all critical approaches, you will begin to see, as we go through this course, all of them have been reactions and responses to the various literary trends and various critical tendencies that went before.

So, there is a certain continuation, a certain continuity that we will begin to locate. And it is in this continuity that we also see the significance of understanding literature and literary criticism as responses to various tendencies within the society, within human life and within the larger structures that define our forms of existence. And Peter Barry's attempt in this introduction is to contextualize the earliest stages in theory and this he identifies as a stage before theory.

And this stage is also broadly defined, broadly referred to using this term, liberal humanism. Barry uses liberal humanism as a corpus term, as a rubric term, which would sort of cover the entire literary critical approach before the 1970s. So it is very important to understand what exactly liberal humanism is. And as and when we go through the various stages from Plato and Aristotle until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with T. S. Eliot and Leavis, we will begin to notice that there is an overarching liberal humanist tendency which is very dominant in all of these approaches.

This is not to say that all of them can be clubbed together under a single framework or under a single mode of understanding. But for the sake of convenience, I find Barry's approach very useful. He has here sort of set up a partition between two different kinds of approaches. And within that also there are certain useful classifications that he gives which if you have taken a look at Barry's introduction, you would have figured that out already.

So coming back to liberal humanism and how Peter Barry defines it. Liberal humanism is a term that Barry uses. Of course, the term was in currency from the 1970s onwards and it has been used to refer to all the assumptions behind, most of the assumptions behind traditional literary criticism. And the term as mentioned, it refers to a period before theory as it emerged from the 1970s onwards. And the 1970s and 1980s are seen as this watershed moment, the watershed decades as far as literary theory is concerned. We find a lot of newer and different kinds of approaches making headway into the field of literature and that is also the transition that we witnessed from modernism to postmodernism, with a lot of poststructuralists newer kinds of theories and modes of understanding, informing the way in which literature has been read, evaluate and critiqued.

And looking at the term liberal humanism, it is important to understand what liberal is in this context, what liberal means in this context. Liberal means, evasive, non-committal in terms of political issues. So it also has a negative connotation when it began to be used from the 1970s onwards. Of course, the fundamental, the driving force behind the idea of liberal humanism is that it believes in the human nature as something fixed, as something universal.

We find that this universality, the universality of literature, the universality of various ways in which literature can influence human life, human nature, this has been seen as one of the fundamental tenets across the different critical approaches before the 1970s. This is a very loose time period so to say. It is not to say that there weren't other kinds of departures before that. But in terms of a discipline, when we are looking at literary criticism within a disciplinary framework, it is important to set certain timelines in order to state and in order to have an informed discussion about the departures, about the various ways in which things have been formulated before and after.

Much has been written about the idea of liberal humanism. But Peter Barry gives us 10 fundamental tenets to identify liberal humanism and also to talk about it. So these frameworks, I find extremely useful, as and when we are going through this course. And I hope, you have already had a chance to look at the 10 tenets, as Peter Barry has given them.

We shall also be going through them very quickly. First of all, in liberal humanism, Barry says, the first tenet is that they believe in the timelessness of good literature and it also addresses, it speaks to what is constant in human nature. This universality, the timelessness of both literature as well as human behaviour, as well as human existence is something that liberal humanism basis most of its assumptions on.

And secondly, liberal humanism also talks about the self-sufficiency of a text. It also means that the text has an inherent meaning, that the text has an inherent independent existence, even when it is removed from all contexts. This also means that there has been no effort, no attempt to look at the historical or the social and political backgrounds when we look at literature, when literature is being read. For the same reason, there is a certain universality attributed to all kinds of literary works, whether in this context or that context, whether within the period when the work is written or in another period, literature or any work of art essentially would make the same kind of sense- that is what it also means by the self-sufficiency of a text.

There is no need for any extra-literary understanding in order to understand a text. And thirdly, liberal humanism also argues that the texts need to be studied in isolation. There could be close verbal analysis. It meant that one could make close verbal analysis without prior expectations or without prior assumptions. The text is studied in isolation without taking into account any of its contexts, not the context of the author, not the context of the historical background.

Fourthly, liberal humanism believes that human nature is essentially unchanging. This incidentally, we find that this tenet of liberal humanism, it does find its inroads into the disciplinary framework of literature so much that literature has generally been seen as a site where human nature is seen as an unchanging, an essentially unchanging entity.

Of course, this has been contested in multiple ways from the 60s and 70s onwards with the new movements, but we also understand that the popular understanding of literature, the popular understanding of criticism, the popular understanding of human nature, it has been largely governed by these humanist tendencies which were popular for centuries.

And fifthly, liberal humanism asserts the individuality of texts, individuality of people, and this individuality that an author, that a human character has or perhaps any human being has, it also transcends all kinds of environmental influences. It does not have a bearing on how a

certain person was raised or how a person's education moulded him or her, or how a person's historical and political backgrounds influenced him or her.

So essentially, liberal humanist tendencies, liberal humanist tenets, also believed that this individuality was extremely important in further accentuating the timelessness and the universality of literature and also the modes of producing literature. And the sixth tenet is that, it is about the purpose of literature. The purpose of literature, the liberal humanist believed, it is the enhancement of life and propagation of human values.

So everything has its foundation on how human existence is defined. Now, we know that there are multiple ways in which human existence can be defined. There is no singular, linear way in which any sort of human life, any sort of human condition can be defined or determined. With the liberal humanist tendency, they also believe that the fundamental purpose of literature is to enhance life and also to propagate human values. And notably, these values are not defined. There is an understanding again that these are universal values across communities, across cultures, across times and traditions.

The seventh point is that, Barry points out that within a liberal humanist framework, in literature, form and content always go together. There is no way in which one can be exclusive of the other. Form and content should be organically fused together, which also means that a novel should look like a novel in terms of form as well as content. Poetry should have the meter, rhythm and structurally to look like a poem.

And this is also something that we notice has been challenged majorly from the 1970s, late 60s onwards with the onslaught of poststructuralism as well as postmodernism. But nevertheless, we also understand that there is a conventional expectation of genres, a conventional expectation of form and structure and certain kinds of content being expected to fall or fit within particular kinds of structures, particular kinds of organic formations.

And this also we find it underlies most of the common notions, most of the popular notions of literature even in the contemporary. And this also can be tied up with the expectations of a universal appeal of literature, or the universal nature of human life, sincerity towards a truth of experience, about the honesty towards the self. And this, liberal humanists argued, this sincerity, about truth, about honesty, it should be inherent in the works that are produced. And again, we can find that there are certain overlaps in these tenets, this also fundamentally

means that the literary work should also have a certain kind of power to influence the value system, to edify human nature.

We find that from the earlier centuries onwards, there is a tendency to see literature as an edifying unit, something that should please, should instruct, should edify. That which does not edify the society, that which does not edify the individual, is not even fit enough to be referred to as good literature. We find that even today, even in the contemporary, this value system being very inherent in evaluating literature: it should be politically edifying, it should be morally edifying, that which corrupts the politics of a country or the moral fabric of a community is not considered as fit enough to be referred to as literature. And if we think about the history of banned texts, the history of banned authors, we would also know that there is an inherent way in which these expectations are still very valid.

And the ninth point is about the tactile enactment, about the sensuous immediacy that literature brings to us. So these are the qualities that liberal humanists think should infuse literature, that liberal humanist think that literature should be infused with. And finally in a very Lockean sense, liberal humanists also believe in English empiricism, this is something we shall be seeing throughout the history of English literature, particularly from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards. And in the history of literary criticism and the ways in which critical thoughts and critical tendencies have evolved, we will continue to see that the English empirical attitude, in a very Lockean sense, is also very dominant almost throughout.

In continuation with his discussion of liberal humanism, Barry also wants us to be very alert and very alive to this transition which happened from criticism towards what he then refers to as theory. The project of theory, Barry argues, it began to happen from the 1960s onwards. Those of you who are familiar with contemporary literary theory would also know that there were many movements. There were many 'isms' that came into various fields of study, various kinds of disciplines from the 60s onwards.

So in that context, Barry also draws our attention to a certain event in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which he claims had sort of taken literary studies away from all the other kinds of disciplines- from language studies, from historical considerations and from philosophical questions which were all inherent in the earlier centuries. And in the process of evolving, in the process of the evolution of a certain kind of critical thought, Barry argues, Barry assumes that this disconnect had become more and more solidified, that had become more and more legitimized at some point of time, especially, with the Cambridge scholars, I.A. Richards and

William Empson and F.R. Leavis coming together with what they also began to call as Practical Criticism.

And we find that this disconnect was more and more evident, but the project of theory, as Barry refers to it, from the 1960s onwards, the attempt, the primary attempt is to re-establish this connection, the connection of literary studies with language studies, the connection of literary studies with the historical consideration and also with the philosophical questions.

So why is this important for us to have a sense of what transpired before the 1960s, from the earliest Greco-Roman times to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? It is very important, because contemporary literary theory is also about forging connections, about bridging this gap between a liberal humanist purely textual kind of study and the other disciplinary approaches which have begun to influence, which have come to formulate the various ways in which text and contexts are being understood, interpreted and critiqued.

In continuation with this discussion, Barry has also conveniently identified two tracks of criticism. And we are talking about the earliest period, from the Greco-Roman times onwards. There is a fundamental, there is a sort of bedrock of civilization if one may call it. There is a foundation, which has been laid by the Greco-Roman masters whereby, Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, they are also considered very universal. They are considered important for many disciplines as you already know.

And from then, when you come to the English literary criticism, the earliest forms of English literary criticism for the sake of convenience and also for giving more clarity about who stood where and what were the things that they and their yardstick stood for, Barry has given two different classifications. He calls them, he refers to them as two tracks. You can find them in the introduction in page 25. If you read through this entire section, you would find out that Peter Barry talks about two tracks of literary criticism.

The first track is text-led, and the second track is ideas-led. In the text-led track, he includes Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. Samuel Johnson is from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Matthew Arnold from the Victorian period, T. S. Eliot from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and F.R. Leavis from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And this is the text-led track, which can also be referred to as a Practical Criticism method. This also refers to the tradition of close reading.

When we look at these texts in greater detail, you would also begin to understand how Barry has classified this. The second track is ideas-led, beginning with Sidney, Philip Sidney of 16<sup>th</sup>

century, Wordsworth of the Romantic period, Coleridge from the Romantic period, George Eliot who belongs to the late Victorian period and Henry James who also belongs to the late Victorian period. This is the ideas-led track.

I repeat, in the text-led track we have Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis, this is largely about practical criticism, about textual criticism, about the tradition of close reading. The ideas-led track has Sidney, Wordsworth, Coleridge, George Eliot and Henry James- this is about tackling bigger issues which are outside the text, about the many things that frame the text, about the historical background, about the context. And this is also about the structure of literary texts, about the effect on readers, effect that literature and these contexts have on readers.

It would not be wrong to say that the move from the 1960s onwards, what has shaped the contemporary from the 1960s onwards, is also largely a continuation of the ideas-led track.

So if we have this distinction, if we keep this distinction in mind between the text-led kind of criticism and ideas-led kind of criticism, we will also begin to see how and where certain thoughts and certain so called universal ideas of literature emerge from. It will also give us a practical sense to deal with various kinds of literary texts, as and when they give in to them.

It would also help us to forge connections between these theoretical aspects and the practical criticism that we shall be doing in course of our academic careers. I hope this discussion will begin to make more sense to you once you have also read through Peter Barry's introduction again. This introduction is very important because it helps us to situate these various texts that we shall be discussing throughout this course.

We shall not be coming back to Peter Barry at any point of this course because it is largely about contemporary literary theory from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. We shall be as stated, this course we will be focusing from the times of Plato, Aristotle onwards till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, ending with T. S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. The most important takeaway from this lecture is that liberal humanist tendencies have largely formulated the fundamental basis of most of the theories and most of the critical approaches that we shall be discussing throughout this course.

And what is more important for us is not to, per se uncritically, take all these critical tenets, but to look at them as part of a historical continuum and to understand how all these various



approaches have together begun to inform the ways of our reading, the ways of our critique of not just texts, but also about the worlds from which these texts are produced.

So, I encourage you again to take a look at the introduction in greater detail. And from tomorrow's session from the next session onwards, we shall be moving towards the Greco-Roman times. And we begin with a background to the Greco-Roman influence and how that also began to be seen as the foundation of western literary critical thought and more importantly, how it laid the foundations of English literary criticism.

We shall be sharing the original texts for reading with you in advance. And as and when you are listening to these discussions, it will be helpful if you have a prior reading, if you have a prior knowledge of the original texts, so the additional discussions will also inform your understanding. That is all we have for today. Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.