

Practical Criticism may be defined as a close textual, verbal analysis of a work of art. The study is pragmatic and empirical, and makes literary criticism factual and scientific analysis. As against to a teacher reading a poem and lecturing on the verses, Richards devised an alternative method that encouraged independent reading and thinking of students. He was preoccupied with the following questions - how does a piece of writing communicate to the reader? How is the reader able to explain what is communicated? Can this type of communication be done in a precise way? Do poems look different if they are presented in isolation from the circumstances in

which they were written or circulated?

Do critical

responses change if the reader is aware of some contextual information? How do we read a

literary work without knowing its

context — a period, a chronology, a social, political,

religious, and intellectual background, a body of similar and contrasting works,

works by the

same and by related authors, linguistic and stylistic conventions, the relevant

conceptions of

art and literature and their role in the world.

Richards is critical of the framework of literature-classrooms and argues that “

The idle hours

of most lives are filled with reveries that are simply bad private poetry” (320). For

Richards,

practical criticism — the close and attentive reading of the words of the poem — is “an opening up of the poem for what it can really be for us: a unique and fascinating experience, carefully wrought by its maker, and fully available only to those with the patience, as well as the sensibility, to recreate” (5). However, the results of Richards’ experiment “was horrifying. Magazine poetasters were extravagantly praised, Donne, Hopkins, and Christina

Rossetti firmly damned; every felicity was ridiculed, and every absurdity praised, by large minorities and even majorities.” Without the intellectual history, the opinion and background of a literary work, the ideal meeting of an isolated mind with an isolated text, then, does not happen. Richards’ project, practical criticism, is a means to train the literary community and create conditions favourable to commune effectively with the poem.

Theoretical framework of Practical Criticism

Richards lists three aims for Practical Criticism:

to introduce a new kind of documentation to those who are interested in the contemporary state culture whether as

critics, as philosophers, as teachers,
as

psychologists, or merely as curious
persons.

to provide a new technique for those
who wish to discover for themselves
what they

think and feel about poetry, and why
should like or dislike it

to prepare way for educational methods
more efficient than those who use now
in

developing discrimination and the power
to understand what we hear and read. (3)

The heart of Richards' framework of
Practical Criticism is the idea that poetry
is essentially a

private experience. Practical Criticism as
a technique of reading appears in

Richards' earlier

work *Principles of Literary Criticism*

(1924). Richards' practical criticism is an

exercise that
is presupposed on the working of a mind
as part of the nervous system, as part of
impulses. In
Principles of Literary Criticism, Richards
defines a poet is one who can order his
experiences
and connect his disconnected impulses
into “a single ordered response” (245).
Language has
to be used in a special “emotive” way so
that the poet’s experiences can be
stimulated in the
mind of the reader. Reading a poem,
then, is a process that will culminate in
stimulating
“equilibrium of opposed impulses” (251).
There is no need of any context. The
words of the

poem ought to produce these impulses in the mind of the reader. The reader must understand

the meaning based on the immediate impulses produced.

Meaning is of four kinds – *sense* is the state/object to which the words direct the reader's

attention; *feeling* is the way the author sees these objects/states; *tone* is the author's attitude

towards the reader; *intention* is the effect which the author is trying to bring about by his

words. "Understanding meaning", therefore, is a complicated process, requiring a grasp not only of each of the four kinds of meaning, but also of their interrelations in the text. Also, a poem must produce in the reader appropriate responses to meter, rhythm, and the visual and aural character of words. Richards claims in *Practical Criticism*: "The only proper attitude is to look upon a successful interpretation, a correct understanding, as a triumph against odds.

We must cease to regard a misinterpretation as a mere unlucky accident. We must treat it as the normal and probable event" (336). Richards sees a poem and the poetic experience as an isolated subjective experience. The

poem is not an object in its own right,
but an experience. Ideally it is an
experience first of
the speaker, and then communicated and
induced in the reader. In either case, the
poem is not
an object existing outside of and
independently of the mind. Richards
suggests in *Principles
of Literary Criticism*: “Let us mean by
Westminster Bridge not the actual
experience which
led Wordsworth on a certain morning
about a century ago to write what he did,
but the class
composed of all actual experiences,
occasioned by the words, which do not
differ within
certain limits from that experience” (226).
A mind is part of the nervous system,
and a mind
can influence other minds through the

mediation of the stimuli. Then, the experience of reading a poem is a private process which is produced in a particular state of mind — a state of equilibrium. Reading and interpreting the poem induces a similar state of stimulus in the minds of the readers. Reading a poem becomes a private experience, part of transient

equilibrium state of the nervous system, as Richards puts it, “the most delicate of all possible

undertakings”:

We have to gather millions of fleeting semi-independent impulses into a momentary structure of fabulous complexity, whose core or germ only is given us in the words.

What we ‘make up’, that momentary trembling order in our minds, is exposed to countless irrelevant influences (317).

It has to be noted that Richards does not negate the social character of a literary work.

Richards stresses that the purpose of this training in practical criticism is not to acquire a heritage of literary wisdom, but to get rid of the preconceptions and stock responses; not to acquire membership of a literary community, but to commune with poetry –

“Our feelings ...
are in the end the whole matter” (301). A
poetic experience is conducted in the
privacy of an
individual mind; a discourse on
poetry is merely an adjunct and not
integral to the
understanding of the poem.

Richards rejects the existence of a
special ‘aesthetic state’— a mode of
experience radically
divorced from practical matters such as
inquiring and desiring:

When we look at a picture, or read a
poem, or listen to music, we are not
doing
something quite unlike what we were
doing on our way to the gallery or
when we
dressed in the morning. The fashion in
which the experience is caused in us
is

different, and as a rule the experience is more complex and, if we are successful, more unified. But our activity is not of a fundamentally different kind. To assume that it is, puts difficulties in the way of describing and explaining it, which are unnecessary and which no one has yet succeeded in overcoming. (12)

Richards's theoretical project was to insert the aesthetic into the everyday material

experience. Without the poems' titles, dates of publication, the poets' names, Richards 'close reading' was a way to intervene in the context of reception, which is to say, the minds of actual, living readers. Criticism, as Richards saw it, was to be a project of aesthetic education.

Key ideas in Richards' Practical Criticism

Richards argues that the relation of text to the author, to cultural roots and background, to other texts are not relational properties of the poem, but only of its stimulus. Knowledge of context merely helps the stimuli to stimulate the minds of the readers and enables the poem to come into existence. Knowledge of context helps the poem to become an

experience in the reader's mind, but is not itself part of that experience. The historical and biographical data are not intrinsic to the meaning of the poem. The words of the poem are its individual units of meaning.

Following this, a poem ceases to be a public document, and can be experienced in isolation.

The words of the poem may have references, but these references only serve as conditions for provoking the correct response in the reader's mind. Richards denies that poems have an objective existence, or that there is an objective truth embodied in literature. There is no correct interpretation of a poem, and poems are private reveries. Richards

considers the correct interpretation of poetry to be difficult and rare. Poetic experiences are a transient event in the individual consciousness, private and isolated, and always threatened by distractions.

Richards departs from the earlier critical method of reading literature, and sees texts less as an example of the primacy of consciousness than as an illusion of language use. As Richards wrote in *Practical Criticism*, language-use is frequently mistaken for introspective self-knowledge:

We do somehow manage to discuss our feelings, sometimes with remarkable facility and success. We say things that seem to be subtle and recondite, and yet true. We do this in spite of our feebleness in introspection and our ignorance of the general nature of feelings. How do we come to be so knowledgeable and clever? . . . Put shortly, the answer seems to be that this knowledge is lying dormant in the dictionary.

Language

has become its repository, a record, a reflection, as it were, human nature (208).

Richards critiques the idea that a poem is a public object, and its vocabulary and syntax are

part of a common literary heritage.

Richards dissuades reading poetry as a social and

cognitive enterprise. By emphasising that a literary work is a stimulant of personal feeling,

Richards dissociates literature from its context. The meaning of a poem is determined by its

reader. In this sense, the reader need not be rooted in the intellectual and spiritual concerns of

the poet and his society. In Richards' scheme of reading, the reader's encounter with a poem

requires him to 'see' the words of the

poem, and not listen to the mediators who introduce an author to him. Richards envisions a literary practise where students read the poem, and are trained to realise the fullest potential of a literary work based on the words of the given text.

A work of literature is important for its aesthetic potential. For Richards, aesthetic beauty is not formal beauty as an end in itself, but in its ability to act as means by which readers can develop their practical faculties: “It is less important to like ‘good’ poetry and dislike ‘bad,’ than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds” (327). The work of literature, for Richards, was to be therapeutic. It was on the basis of this

kind of aesthetic

thinking, which sees the aesthetic as a mode of instrumental, rather than final value that

Richards develops the methodological innovations of reading practises.

Richards seeks to

answer the fundamental question - “

What is the value of the arts, why are they worth the

devotions of the keenest hours of the best minds, and what is their place in

the system of

human endeavours?” (3)

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