



## **Changing Concepts of Literature and Criticism: From Plato's Mimetic Theory to Leavis's Moral Criticism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present study, titled “Changing Concepts of Literature and Criticism: From Plato’s Mimetic Theory to Leavis’s Moral Criticism,” explores the historical development of literary criticism from classical Greek philosophy to modern moral criticism. Literature and literary criticism have continuously evolved according to changing philosophical, cultural, and intellectual traditions. The study primarily examines Plato’s concept of mimesis and F.R. Leavis’s theory of moral criticism in order to understand how ideas regarding the nature, function, and value of literature transformed across different historical periods.

Plato viewed literature as an imitation of reality and questioned its moral and social influence, particularly in relation to truth and ethical discipline. Aristotle responded by defending poetry as a creative and valuable form of representation that provides emotional purification and universal insight. Later literary critics and movements gradually shifted the focus of criticism toward imagination, aesthetics, culture, and morality. In the modern period, F.R. Leavis emphasized literature as a means of developing moral sensitivity, cultural awareness, and intellectual refinement. His criticism highlighted the close relationship between literature and life.

The study adopts a qualitative, analytical, comparative, and historical approach based mainly on primary and secondary textual sources. Through comparative analysis, the research investigates the continuity and transformation between classical and modern literary criticism. It also examines how literature has consistently remained connected to ethical and social concerns despite major theoretical changes.

The study is expected to contribute to the understanding of the historical evolution of Western literary criticism and the changing concepts of literature and criticism from imitation to moral evaluation. It will also provide insight into the continuing relevance of literary criticism in understanding human values, culture, and society.

**Keywords:** Literary Criticism, Mimesis, Moral Criticism, Plato, Aristotle, F.R. Leavis, Literature and Society, Classical Criticism, Modern Criticism.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Literature and literary criticism have undergone continuous transformation from ancient times to the modern period. The concepts of literature, its purpose, and its relationship with society have changed according to the intellectual, cultural, and philosophical developments of different ages. Literary criticism, therefore, serves as an important tool for understanding how literature has been interpreted and evaluated across centuries. The present study, titled



“Changing Concepts of Literature and Criticism: From Plato’s Mimetic Theory to Leavis’s Moral Criticism,” aims to examine the evolution of literary thought from classical Greek criticism to twentieth-century moral criticism.

The foundation of Western literary criticism can be traced back to the works of Plato and Aristotle. Plato’s theory of mimesis, discussed mainly in *The Republic*, views literature as an imitation of reality. According to Plato, poetry is twice removed from truth because it imitates the physical world, which itself is only a copy of ideal reality. Plato was deeply concerned about the moral and social effects of literature, and he believed that poetry could negatively influence human emotions and ethical behaviour. His criticism established an important relationship between literature, morality, and society.

Aristotle, Plato’s disciple, responded to his teacher’s arguments in *Poetics*. Unlike Plato, Aristotle defended poetry and considered it a natural and valuable form of artistic expression. He argued that literature represents universal truths and provides emotional purification or catharsis. Aristotle’s ideas broadened the understanding of literature and laid the foundation for systematic literary criticism. From classical criticism onward, different literary movements and critics developed new approaches to understanding literature according to the changing social and intellectual environment.

During the Renaissance, Romantic, Victorian, and Modern periods, criticism gradually moved from imitation and morality toward imagination, emotion, aesthetics, and social responsibility. In the twentieth century, F.R. Leavis emerged as one of the most influential moral critics in English literary studies. Leavis emphasized the moral seriousness of literature and believed that great literature refines human sensitivity and ethical awareness. Through works such as *The Great Tradition*, he highlighted the importance of literature in shaping civilized and morally responsible individuals. Unlike purely formalist critics, Leavis focused on the close relationship between literature, life, and moral values.

This study seeks to trace the development of literary criticism from Plato’s mimetic theory to Leavis’s moral criticism and to analyse how the concepts of literature and criticism changed over time. The study will examine the similarities and differences between classical and modern approaches to criticism, especially regarding the role of literature in society and human life. It will also explore how literature has continuously been viewed not merely as artistic expression but as a medium of moral, intellectual, and cultural development.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The concepts of literature and literary criticism have changed significantly from ancient Greek philosophy to modern literary theory. Different critics and scholars have interpreted the purpose, function, and value of literature according to the intellectual and cultural conditions of their periods. Plato’s mimetic theory considered literature as imitation and questioned its moral and social influence, whereas modern critics like F.R. Leavis emphasized literature as a source of moral awareness and human refinement. These changing perspectives reveal that literary criticism is not static but continuously evolving.

However, despite the importance of these developments, there remains a need to critically examine the transition from classical theories of imitation to modern concepts of moral

criticism. Many studies discuss Plato and Leavis separately, but comparatively fewer studies focus on the continuity and transformation between their ideas. This creates a gap in understanding how literary criticism developed from concerns about imitation and truth to ideas of morality, culture, and social responsibility.

The present study attempts to analyse the changing concepts of literature and criticism by comparing Plato's mimetic theory with Leavis's moral criticism and exploring their relevance in the broader history of literary thought.

### **3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- To examine Plato's concept of mimesis and analyse his views regarding the nature, function, and moral impact of literature in classical literary criticism.
- To study Aristotle's response to Plato and understand the development of classical literary criticism in relation to imitation, poetry, and artistic representation.
- To analyse the changing concepts of literature and criticism from classical to modern periods through different literary and intellectual traditions.
- To evaluate F.R. Leavis's theory of moral criticism and his ideas about literature, culture, morality, and social responsibility in modern literary studies.
- To compare Plato's mimetic theory and Leavis's moral criticism in order to identify continuity, differences, and transformation in literary critical thought.

### **4. SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The present study focuses on the development and transformation of literary criticism from the classical period to the modern age, with special reference to Plato's mimetic theory and F.R. Leavis's moral criticism. The study aims to examine how the concepts of literature, imitation, morality, and criticism evolved across different historical and intellectual contexts. It mainly concentrates on the ideas presented by Plato in *The Republic* and by F.R. Leavis in works such as *The Great Tradition* and other critical writings.

The scope of the study is limited to selected theories and concepts related to literary criticism rather than a detailed analysis of all critical schools and movements. Although reference may be made to Aristotle and other critics for contextual understanding, the primary focus remains on the transition from classical mimetic criticism to modern moral criticism. The study also explores the relationship between literature and society, literature and morality, and the changing role of criticism in shaping literary values.

The research is based mainly on secondary sources such as books, journals, research articles, and critical essays. The study is theoretical and analytical in nature and does not include empirical or field-based research. It seeks to provide a concise understanding of the historical evolution of literary criticism and its continuing relevance in literary studies.

Write an " Research Methodology (1000 Words Total)" for MA in English Course Project Synopsis (Project Proposal, Not the Final Dissertation) for the following title "Changing Concepts of Literature and Criticism: From Plato's Mimetic Theory to Leavis's Moral Criticism" Note - Do Not mention word limit anywhere

## **5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The present study, titled “Changing Concepts of Literature and Criticism: From Plato’s Mimetic Theory to Leavis’s Moral Criticism,” follows a qualitative and analytical research methodology. The study aims to examine the evolution of literary criticism from classical Greek thought to modern moral criticism. Since the research deals with theories, concepts, and interpretations related to literature and criticism, the qualitative method is considered most appropriate for the study.

The research is mainly theoretical and descriptive in nature. It seeks to analyse the ideas of Plato and F.R. Leavis regarding literature, morality, and criticism. The study also traces the historical development of literary criticism from the classical period to the twentieth century. A comparative approach is adopted to understand the similarities and differences between Plato’s mimetic theory and Leavis’s moral criticism. Through comparison, the research attempts to identify how literary criticism evolved while continuing to focus on ethical and social concerns.

The study is based primarily on secondary sources of data. Information is collected from books, journals, research articles, dissertations, essays, and academic publications related to literary criticism and literary theory. Primary texts such as Plato’s *The Republic*, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and F.R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition and Revaluation* are used as major sources for understanding the selected theories. Secondary critical works by scholars and literary historians are also consulted to gain a broader understanding of the subject.

The method of data collection is library-based and text-oriented. Relevant materials are gathered from university libraries, digital archives, online journals, and scholarly databases. Notes and references are carefully selected according to the relevance of the topic and the authenticity of the source material. Important concepts such as mimesis, morality, catharsis, literary value, and social responsibility are identified and analysed during the research process. The study uses textual and interpretative methods of analysis. The selected texts are closely read to understand the critical arguments presented by Plato and Leavis. Their views on literature and criticism are interpreted within their respective historical and philosophical contexts. The comparative method further helps in examining the transition from classical criticism, which emphasized imitation and truth, to modern criticism, which stressed morality and cultural values.

The research also follows a historical approach to literary criticism. It analyses how literary theories developed according to changing intellectual, cultural, and social conditions. The study examines how literature came to be viewed not only as artistic representation but also as a medium of moral and cultural development.

The scope of the methodology is limited to selected literary theories and critics related to the research topic. The study does not include empirical or field-based research. Its primary objective is to provide a systematic and critical understanding of the changing concepts of literature and criticism from Plato to Leavis. Through this methodology, the research aims to contribute to the study of literary criticism and its historical development in Western literary tradition.

## **6. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Plato (380 BCE) – The Republic**

Plato's *The Republic* is one of the earliest and most influential works of literary criticism. In this work, Plato introduces the theory of mimesis, arguing that literature is merely an imitation of reality and therefore distant from truth. He expresses concern regarding the moral and emotional influence of poetry on society, especially on young minds. Plato believes that poetry often encourages irrational emotions and weakens moral discipline. His criticism establishes an important connection between literature, ethics, and politics. The work remains significant because it laid the foundation for later debates on the purpose and function of literature in society.

### **Aristotle (335 BCE) – Poetics**

Aristotle's *Poetics* is considered a response to Plato's negative attitude toward poetry. Aristotle defends literature by arguing that poetry represents universal truths rather than false imitation. He introduces important concepts such as catharsis, plot, character, and tragedy, which became central to classical literary criticism. Aristotle views literature as a natural human activity that provides emotional purification and intellectual pleasure. Unlike Plato, he recognizes the creative and artistic value of poetry. His systematic approach to literary analysis greatly influenced Western criticism and established the basis for later formal and structural studies of literature.

### **Sir Philip Sidney (1595) – An Apology for Poetry**

In *An Apology for Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney defends poetry against moral and philosophical criticism. He argues that poetry combines imagination, moral instruction, and delight more effectively than philosophy or history. Sidney believes that literature inspires virtuous action by presenting ideal examples of human conduct. His work reflects Renaissance humanism and highlights the educational and ethical value of literature. Sidney's ideas are important in the history of criticism because they shift the focus from imitation alone to the moral and imaginative power of poetry. His defense of literature influenced later literary and moral criticism.

### **Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817) – Biographia Literaria**

Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* contributed significantly to Romantic literary criticism. He emphasized imagination as the creative force behind literature and distinguished between imagination and fancy. Unlike classical critics who focused on imitation and rules, Coleridge viewed poetry as an expression of human creativity and emotional experience. He also discussed the relationship between literature, philosophy, and human consciousness. His criticism reflects the Romantic belief that literature should express inner truth and emotional depth. Coleridge's ideas helped literary criticism move away from rigid classical standards toward more psychological and imaginative approaches to literature.

### **Matthew Arnold (1865) – Essays in Criticism**

Matthew Arnold viewed literature as a means of moral and cultural improvement. In *Essays in Criticism*, he argued that criticism should evaluate literature according to "high seriousness"

and universal human values. Arnold believed that literature could guide society during periods of social and cultural decline. His critical method combined moral evaluation with aesthetic appreciation. Arnold also emphasized the importance of objectivity and intellectual discipline in criticism. His work strongly influenced later moral critics, especially F.R. Leavis. Arnold's ideas represent an important stage in the transition from Victorian humanism to twentieth-century moral criticism.

#### **T.S. Eliot (1920) – The Sacred Wood**

T.S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* introduced new perspectives in modern literary criticism. Eliot emphasized tradition, impersonality, and objective analysis in literature. He argued that poetry should not be viewed merely as personal emotion but as a disciplined artistic expression connected to literary tradition. His essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" became especially influential in modern criticism. Eliot's ideas challenged Romantic subjectivity and encouraged close textual analysis. Although different from Leavis in certain respects, Eliot also stressed the cultural significance of literature. His criticism played a major role in shaping twentieth-century literary studies and modern critical theory.

#### **I.A. Richards (1924) – Principles of Literary Criticism**

I.A. Richards introduced a scientific and psychological approach to literary criticism in *Principles of Literary Criticism*. He examined how readers respond emotionally and intellectually to literature and argued that literature helps balance human emotions and experiences. Richards emphasized close reading and practical criticism, which later influenced New Criticism. He believed that literature has psychological and moral importance in modern society. His analytical method marked a shift toward detailed textual interpretation and reader response. Richards's work also influenced F.R. Leavis, especially in understanding literature as an instrument for moral and intellectual development.

#### **F.R. Leavis (1948) – The Great Tradition**

In *The Great Tradition*, F.R. Leavis identifies major English novelists who, according to him, represent moral seriousness and artistic excellence. He argues that literature should cultivate moral sensitivity, critical intelligence, and cultural awareness. Leavis believed that great literature reflects profound human values and contributes to ethical understanding. He strongly opposed commercialism and superficial popular culture, which he thought weakened literary standards. His critical approach combines close textual analysis with moral evaluation. The work remains significant because it established Leavis as one of the leading moral critics of the twentieth century and influenced English literary studies deeply.

### **7. EXPECTED OUTPUT**

The present study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of literary criticism from the classical period to the modern age. By analysing Plato's mimetic theory and F.R. Leavis's moral criticism, the research will highlight how the concepts of literature, morality, and criticism have changed across different historical and intellectual contexts. The study is expected to demonstrate that literary criticism is not a fixed discipline but a continuously developing field influenced by social, philosophical, and cultural changes.



The research will help in understanding the similarities and differences between classical and modern critical approaches, particularly regarding the relationship between literature and morality. It is also expected to show that despite major transformations in literary thought, concerns about ethics, truth, and social responsibility have remained central to criticism. Another expected outcome of the study is the development of a clearer historical perspective on Western literary criticism. The study may contribute to academic discussions related to literary theory and critical traditions by connecting classical criticism with twentieth-century moral criticism. Furthermore, the research is expected to serve as a useful reference for students and scholars interested in literary criticism, the history of ideas, and the philosophical foundations of literature.

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