

Topic: Critical Appreciation

Course title: Academic Writing

Paper: GE4

Unit: SEC B2

Semester: 4

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Critical appreciation

Critical appreciation is not part of creative literature although it is something that students of literature have to engage in. It is the response of a reader who reads, reflects upon and then evaluates literary works with a critical eye. For example, while reading a poem it is simply not enough to say that the poem is “good” or “bad”. That would be a simple appreciation of the said work. Critical appreciation involves evaluation of literary works with critical tools and a certain objectivity.

1. Careful reading - making mental notes while reading, observing the form and the content.
2. Evaluation of the content- making a note of the central idea, i.e. what the author wishes to convey.
3. Evaluation of the form- making a note of the structure, if it is a poem what is the “type” or “kind” of poetry, if it is in prose- is it personal or reflective or a general essay.
4. All evaluations should be done from a literary stand point. One cannot engage in a personal like/dislike, or adopt a subjective style. In other words, there is no scope of the “personal” to interfere in the critical assessment at all.

The easiest approach to a critical appreciation is to prepare the response in two distinct sections. The first section should focus on the “content” and the second on the “form”. That is to say, the first part of a critical appreciation should focus on the content or subject. Let us take the example of a popular verse every child has learnt in school. While using the word “verse” you must have already noted how I have identified the “kind” of work I am about to analyze. I am about to analyze a “verse” i.e. a written work that has a rhyme scheme and so is a form of “poetry”. I have also mentioned this is a verse we have learnt in school. So, what can you deduce from this statement? Obviously, I am talking about a nursery rhyme.

Jack and Jill went up the hill
 To fetch a pail of water
 Jack fell down and broke his crown
 And Jill came tumbling after

Now, consider these four lines. What do you make of this rhyme? Make a note of your observations.

- It is not “serious” poetry. It is meant to target a young mind that is beginning to read and recite. Although adults would still read it anyway, it is not something that will appeal to the adult sensibility. It will not make the adult think, reflect or meditate on things that are central in the actual lived experience.
- On the other hand, this verse has the quality of a “picture” that will appeal to young minds (possibly with similar names). Young Jacks and Jills will find in this a story and an instruction. For them, scaling hills to bring water is exciting. But there is an inherent risk of scaling hills: Jack falls down and breaks his “crown” (head). This will invariably make children think twice before scaling hills unattended. Similarly,

Jill comes tumbling down the hill as she too “falls”. The author does not at any point mention why Jack fell down or why Jill came tumbling. Maybe that isn’t the point. Maybe the intention is to suggest that such unexpected dangers or accidents can befall the Jacks and Jills, anywhere, anytime. So, it might not be “serious” poetry for adults but it is serious enough for children who identify themselves with Jack and Jill.

- I mentioned that these lines present a picture, a picture that is vivid enough to stir the imagination of children. This is also part of the author’s intent. The use of words and images of two little children, on their way up the hill, with a “pail” or bucket evoke or build up the image which can trigger the imagination of children. Young minds cannot relate to profound things such as Keats’ “Grecian urn”. They can comprehend and relate to very ordinary things such as a “pail”.
- What about the “form”? The word “form” refers to the structure or framework. This is a verse, a nursery rhyme. It has a particular rhyme that has a musical quality. In fact, this is a very popular song for children. It follows a stress-unstress sing song pattern. There are no long or difficult words. All the words are simple both in meaning and articulation. The rhyme scheme is simple: ab-cb i.e. the second and fourth lines rhyme (“water” rhymes with “after”)

So, when we begin to analyze poetry or prose, we follow this basic pattern. First, the analysis of the content: the subject matter, the central idea, the words or images or figures of speech used, in order to express and elaborate. We assess why the author uses the kind of language. We assess how far the author is successful in expressing, or if the literary piece has failed to live up to the expectations of the readers.

You must have noted, I did not use a single personal pronoun while discussing the rhyme above. Let us look at some of the rules before we start critical appreciation.

- You CANNOT use personal pronouns. You cannot say “I feel”, “I think” etc. while writing a critical appreciation. Instead, you should try using “one may say”, “it can be suggested” etc.
- You should NOT write a summary of the poem or prose piece that is given. Critical appreciation is not about writing summaries. You are required to critically evaluate the poem or prose piece that is given to you.
- If you want to quote from the poem or prose piece given to you, you are supposed to use appropriate quotation marks. For example, if you are quoting from “Jack and Jill” you should put them inside quotation marks: “Jill came tumbling after”.
- If you are quoting from external sources you have to follow the same rule i.e. use quotation marks “...” and cite the source within brackets at the end of the sentence. For instance, if you are quoting lines or words from another rhyme/poem/prose while writing on “Jack and Jill” you have to put the lines within quotation marks like this: “Sing a song”. This should be followed by citing the name of the rhyme and the name of the author if the author is known- like this: (“Sing a song of six pence”) at the end of the sentence where you have used the quotation.

