UNIT 1: HISTORY OF GREEK AND ROMAN CRITICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE:

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- *identify* the main lines of thought in classical criticism
- *discuss* the history of Greek criticism with reference to important critics like Plato and Aristotle
- *describe* the development of Roman Criticism with reference to the critics
- *trace* the history of Rhetoric
- *discuss* the important critical ideas in classical criticism in general

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of thies course you are studying. In this unit, we shall discuss the history of Greek and Roman criticism. You perhaps know that the word criticism has been derived from the ancient Greek term ‘krites’ meaning ‘judge’. It involves some kind of self-assessment, reflection and judgement. Anthologies covering the history criticism and literary theory usually begin with the classical critics, because their influence has continued up to the present. The most influential classical

theorists in Western culture are Plato and Aristotle, followed distantly by Horace. Recently, a renewed interest in Rhetoric has brought Gorgias, Quintilian, and others into the picture. Taken together, the classical theorists represent a wide range of opinions about literature and its significance developed over a millennium (from the 5th century BC to the 5th century CE). In this unit, we shall try to examine the basic premises of Greek and Roman criticism as well as the history of Rhetoric. It is hoped that by the time you finish reading this unit, you will gain sufficient ideas regarding how classical criticism involved itself with the discussions of issues and aspects such as 'imitation' and 'representations' which are still so significant for the students of English literature.

1.3 HISTORY OF GREEK CRITICISM

In Europe, the art of criticism began in ancient Greece. Although the exact timing cannot be ascertained, it seemed to have attracted unprecedented attention during the 5th century BC. To speak of Athens of that time, following an unprecedented intellectual awakening, many scholars and learned men, freely discussed the different aspects of religion, philosophy, morality, politics, art, and literature—areas with which they were mostly concerned. This was also the period of learned men like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Socrates, Aristophanes—all who lived through this age.



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The city of Athens became historically important as it could defend two Persian invasions. Subsequently, Athens organised the "Delian League" of Greek allies with a view to liberating Asia Minor from the rule of the Persians. During the reign of Pericles, Athens flourished economically, socially and culturally. The cultural activities could be best seen in terms of drama practised by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and the emergence of the schools of Rhetoric.

However, Athens received her major challenge from Sparta, who established the Peloponnesian League. This struggle for supremacy between the two city-states led finally to the Peloponnesian War spanning over 21 years, and ending with the utter defeat of Athens in 404 BC.

Aristophanes was the first among them to apply his mind to critical considerations of literature. In his comedy *The Frogs,* he discussed the relative merits of Aeschylus and Euripides, making critical enquiry the criterion to judge the merit of poetry and drama, and to identify the relative importance of morality in art and the choice of language. We may state that the first regular criticism of the Western world begins with Aristophanes. The contrast between Aeschylus and Euripides presupposes Aristophanes' familiarity with some kind of great literatures prior to them. Although during that times, books were rare and expensive; this familiarity was a product not of reading but of hearing usually at different festivals where both comedy and tragedy were produced. Along with plays, epic was yet another genre that could attract a larger number of audiences.

You should note that in Classical Greece; only a minority could study literature, but it is interesting also to note that tragedy and epics could easily reach out to a larger section of people of the society. As Russell and Winterbottom have stated, Aristophanes in his *The Frogs* was able to make Euripides claim that a poet was to be admired "for his expertise and his sound advice, because we improve by our teachings/ mankind's civic sense and their natures too". He made Aeschylus claim, "The poets alone are the teachers of youth". The Aristophanic Aeschylus even asserts that the poets taught more than moral values. Therefore, the view of the poet as the instructor was something that was to raise a whole lot of debate in the subsequent days to come.

It can be assumed that the main context for classical criticism can be traced through the role the poet and poetry would play; and poetry in the Greek sense, meant tragedy, comedy and epic. However, any discussion of the history of criticism usually starts with the classical

critics/theorists rightly because of their influence on the development of criticism in subsequent times. The most important and influential classical critics of Western culture are Plato and Aristotle, followed roughly by Horace. However, the recent interest in Rhetoric has also brought in Gorgias, Quintilian, and others into the canon of classical criticism. The classical Greek thinkers present a wide range of opinions about literature and its development over a millennium from around the 5th century BC–the two most significant and interrelated issues of their time being **Mimesis** and **Didacticism**. You should note that Plato and his pupil Aristotle perhaps provide important views on these two issues.



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The Socratic Method:

Little is known about the early life of Plato's master Socrates. We learn about him only through the dialogues of Plato himself, Xenophone, and Aristophanes, besides some other sources. Plato is famous for what may be called *The Socratic Method.* Plato's own writings, especially the early works, help us to examine how the Socratic Method worked. In his works, Socrates appears as a character/speaker through a kind of "Socratic conversations", which in fact, structures Plato's own works. However, one should not confuse this with the idea that Plato is giving us the (real) historical Socrates. He was actually recreating Socrates as a fictional or dramatic character, as "the main point of the Dialogues in which Socrates confronts sophists is to bring out the contrast between his genuine philosophising and their counterfeit."

However, you might find it interesting to note that the moral effect of poetry, along with the idea of the poet, was becoming even more important a critical preoccupation of both Plato and Aristotle. Both seem to have agreed that mimesis (imitation or representation) is a key feature of poetry, but they evaluated it quite differently. For example, Plato influenced by his mentor Socrates, often refused to accept poetry's

imitation of reality because it cannot depict truth and teach morality, and that it is irrational and is based on inspiration, not on actual knowledge. Plato, as an idealist philosopher, locates reality in a transcendent world of eternal Forms or Ideas that only **reason** can properly apprehend. For him, this world is distinct from the illusory phenomenal world of our senses, which poetry seeks to represent. Since the material world is an imperfect copy of the original transcendent world of ideas, Plato believed that poetry is but a degraded copy of a copy. He finally concludes that poetic representation threatens social stability by offering false images and role models.

In his *Republic*, Plato has Socrates recommend that poets should be banished from the ideal society, except perhaps those poetry, which praise the gods. Plato takes this severe position as part of his reaction against the views of earlier sophists such as Gorgias and Thrasymachus who were less concerned with truth than with persuasion. They used language not simply to represent reality but to produce reality by shaping the beliefs of an audience. Such a background strongly influenced Plato's ethical position as a critic. According to Plato, epics and tragedy are based on a corrupting mythology, encourages human feelings that are to be tamed, and in any case, gives us a world that itself is somehow inferior to the ultimate realities of the Forms.

However, Plato's views met with reactions. The most famous came from his own disciple Aristotle who reacted firmly to Plato's views on imitation, because he believed that it is not the main duty of poetry to dictate a favourable view of human behaviour, and represent the world correctly, for 'this does not involve the essential nature of poetry'. Unlike Plato and Socrates, Aristotle makes imitation the foundation of his views on poetry, and asserts that the desire to imitate, which is basic in man, provides pleasures to the imitators as well as his audience. Poetic imitation can reveal truth precisely because it does not copy appearances: it is a more creative act. Poetry in this view is an organised whole, whose parts are organically related and subordinated to a single objective. He illustrates this with reference to tragic drama in which the plot is the key example of the organisation of poetry. For him, plot is not

a random sequence of incidents but a unified whole with a beginning, a middle and an end, and structured by logical necessity. Unlike history, which is built on accidental details, poetry rises above the description of particulars to represent universal truths about nature. This new view of imitation springs from Aristotle's belief that human beings have a natural instinct for imitation, which is generally pleasurable and connected with learning.

Later developments in classical criticism develop from this groundbreaking work of the Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. For example, Horace follows Aristotle while asserting that poets can and must imitate nature, and adds that it is also important for young poets to imitate great writers. As he approves of poetic imitation, Horace stresses the importance of morality and decorum. For him, the pleasures of imitation are best yoked with moral teaching. He declares that the primary function of poetry is to combine "pleasure with usefulness". This famous Horatian maxim has exerted considerable influence on all subsequent theorising on the idea of poetry.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What significance does Aristophane's play *The Frogs* carry in the discussion of classical Greek criticism?

Q 2: What, according to you, is the basic difference between Plato and Aristotle with respect to Mimesis?

Q 3: How does the Socratic Method work in Plato?

Q 4: On what grounds, did Plato reject the poets from his ideal society?

Q 5: Why did Aristotle react to his master Plato's views on the idea of imitation?

1.4 HISTORY OF ROMAN CRITICISM

In the previous section, you have read briefly about the Greek tradition of Classical Criticism. You must have realised that literary

criticism goes as far as the 8th century BC, which was also the era of the epic poets— Homer, and Hesiod, and of the lyric poets Archilochus, Ibycus, Alcaeus and Sappho. Around the 1st century BC when the age of Plato and Aristotle was over, the centre of literary and cultural activity shifted from Alexandria to Rome, the then capital of the Roman Empire. Various factors contributed to the flowering of literary and critical activity during the era. The Greek classics became a constant source of inspiration and stimulation for the Romans. This revival of Greek classical tradition was inaugurated by Virgil (70 BC-19 BC) and Horace (65 BC-8 BC). That way, the Roman Classical tradition seems to be a continuation of Greek thoughts, ideas, and values.

However, the Romans did manage to preserve something of their own identity. The Roman tradition in literary criticism began with Horace. He was both a critic and a creative writer. His first book of the *Satires* and the *Epodes* were originally not intended for publication, but were read to his friends. Horace himself calls these works *Sermones* or "Talks". He even disclaims the title of poet, though his "Talks" are in hexameters. His lyric poems are deliberate attempts to add to the beauty of Roman literature and thereby to the glory of the Roman Empire. In addition, it is chiefly to the poems that he owes his fame today.

"Epistle to Pisos" or *Ars Poetica* is the most important critical document written by Horace. It drew heavily on Alexandrian poetic theory and Roman Rhetoric. *Ars Poetica* is not a systematic treatise on poetry, but Horace derived his views in part from his own experience and part from his own reading. It is written in the form of an informal letter. He insists that each poem must have a consistent fundamental idea or plot. He advises care in the choice of a subject. Throughout the letter or treatise, he constantly impresses upon his readers his conviction that good poetry is the result of hard work. Therefore, it is a treatise on the art of writing poetry, which aims to lay down rules and precepts for the guidance of would-be writers. According to him, the aim of poetry is 'to instruct, or to delight' or both. The concept of 'decorum' runs like an undertone throughout *Ars Poetica*. The satires and the epistles are full of

brilliant and witty sayings, of critical and historical remarks; they throw much light upon the social and literary life of the period, and acquaint us with the character of the poet. Thus, his contribution to the history of Roman criticism is inestimable.

After the period of the early Roman Empire, two broad intellectual currents emerged during the first four centuries, viz., the Second Sophistic (27 BC-AD 410) and Neo-Platonism. The Second Sophistic was named after a new generation of Rhetoricians who took for their model the language and style of classical Athens. In this period, the speakers focused on style and delivery and Rhetorical ornamentation rather than everyday life and the actual affairs of the state. The focus was on imitation of earlier models, especially those of 4th century Athens. Hence, the art of Rhetoric lost its public role because of its focus on formalisation of rules for literary composition. Longinus's "On the Sublime" is the most influential Rhetorical text produced during the period called the Second Sophistic. This treatise was originally written in Greek entitled, *Peri Hupsous*. It has exerted a powerful influence on literary criticism and critics of the modern period are fascinated by his treatment of the sublime as a quality of the soul or spirit rather than as a matter of mere technique. As a critical piece of work, it remains unsurpassed for its sheer originality and power. However, Plotinus developed the philosophy of Neo-Platonism. The Neo-Platonists preferred allegorical and symbolic modes of interpretation, opening the way for Christian medieval conceptions of allegory and discourse. Along with Plotinus, the other exponents are Macrobius and Boethius. Like the Rhetoricians of the Second Sophistic, the Neo-Platonists had reverence for the classical texts.

Therefore, the study of the Roman tradition of classical criticism has to be studied keeping the above mentioned issues in mind. You will do well by reading any good book on classical literary criticism in this regard.



LET US KNOW

There is no mention of "On the Sublime" in any ancient text still extant, and it was largely unknown prior to its rediscovery during the Italian Renaissance. Following Boileau's popular translation of 1674, however, the treatise became a standard object of study for literary critics from Dryden onwards. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Neoclassical critics, primarily in England, frequently cited the text. Its influence is evident in such works as Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, and extends to such critics as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Burke, Joseph Addison, Coleridge, and Alexander Pope. Despite its relative anonymity prior to the 17th and 18th centuries, modern critics have found "On the Sublime" to prefigure their own literary perspectives and to be as relevant and insightful as other standard ancient texts by Aristotle, Horace, and Quintilian.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Who is Horace? What is his historical significance?

Q 7: Describe the significance of *Ars Poetica*?

Q 8: Why is the Second Sophistic period historically significant?

1.5 THE TRADITION OF RHETORIC

The term Rhetoric is derived from the Greek word, *rhetor* meaning 'speaker'. This term, which initially referred to the method of public speaking, also deals with the methods of persuasion on the part of a speaker. Towards the end of the 5th century BC, Rhetoric originated as an art in Greece. Nearly 50 years before the birth of Aristotle, the Sophists Corax and Tisias taught legal Rhetoric in Syracuse. Gorgias of Leontini was another great Rhetorician who enthralled audiences in Athens after arriving there in 427.

While discussing the history of Rhetoric, we should first try to know who the Sophists were. They were special teachers generally traveling and teaching a wide range of subjects for payment. The Sophists (sophos, meaning 'wise') were so influential that Rhetoric became the main focus of education in ancient Greece. However, as times elapsed, the Sophists were replaced by **Schools,** such as those of Plato and Isocrates. Many Sophists were specialised in using the tools of philosophy and Rhetoric, though others taught subjects such as Music, Athletics, and Mathematics. Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Lysias, and Isocrates were among the most influential of the Greek Sophists. You will note that in the satiric comedy *Clouds*, Aristophanes satirises the sophists. Some scholars often view that the Greeks were already the inheritors of a tradition of Rhetoric as visible in the example of Homer's *Odyssey* or in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, where speeches hold the key to power or knowledge is mediated by the power of language and oratory.

In Athens of that period, the Sophists remained quite active. Since they were to teach young men about the art of speaking and the conduct of public debate, they were of high demand for the kind of education and training they imparted. As Rhetoric was an important component of their education, they helped to develop theories of Rhetoric, which, in turn, led to further developments in styles of oratory. Against the view that they dealt only with the art of persuasion, it has now been proven that they covered instruction on a wide range of topics such as social history, art history, grammar, the nature of virtue (*arete*), and so on. In general, the Sophists claimed to teach arête ("excellence" or "virtue") to young statesmen and nobility. However, very few writings have survived of the first Sophists. The early Sophists' practice of charging money for education and providing wisdom only to those who could pay handsomely, invited contempt and condemnations on the part of Socrates and Plato in his *Dialogues*, as well as on the part of Xenophone in *Memorabilia* and, somewhat controversially, by Aristotle who, being paid to tutor Alexander the Great, could also be accused of being a Sophist.

However, many Sophists did flourish in later periods, especially during the Roman history, and they came to be known as the Second Sophists. It developed in the Roman world with Cato, Cicero, and Quintilian and came to be nearly equivalent with higher education therein. Greek Rhetoric was introduced into Rome in the 2nd century BC. Alexandria, the famous centre of the Hellenistic world, was home to scholars working in various fields like poetic composition, literary criticism, and science. Hellenistic education concerned itself with practical skills of written and oral composition. Hermagoras of Temnos, of the 2nd century BC, wrote an important work on Rhetoric, and he was the major influence behind two early Roman texts on Rhetoric, namely—*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and Cicero's *De inventione*. The first text, of anonymous authorship, presents a detailed discussion of the five-part system of Roman Rhetoric. Cicero's work, *De invention,* was published at an early age in the 1st century BC and it highlights the political importance of Rhetoric. Here, Cicero stresses the point that a speaker must not only be eloquent but also wise, as Rhetoric promotes a just society based on common welfare. Some of Cicero's other works include *De oratore*, *Brutus*, *Orator*, *De optimo genere oratorum*, *Partitione oratoria* and *Topica*. You will note here that in *De oratore*, Cicero inquires into the connection between Philosophy, Rhetoric and other forms of knowledge.



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Rhetoric arose in 5th century BC in ancient Greece. It developed in the hands of the Sophists, later Aristotle in the Greek world, and then Cato, Cicero, and Quintilian, in the Roman world. In its classical form, until the time of Cicero, there were five parts or "offices"—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.

Cicero identifies six parts of a speech: the introduction and the insinuation, the narrative, the partition, the confirmation, the refutation, and the peroration.

Quintilian was another figure whose influence rivaled that of Cicero's. His *Institutio Orataria* shows in detail the importance of

Rhetoric in the Roman educational system, which proposes the education for an ideal orator from an early age. In the preface, Quintilian stresses the close association of moral goodness with true oratory. The important point that Quintilian insists is that the teacher of Rhetoric should be of exemplary morality.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: Who became famous as the Sophists in ancient Greece?

Q 10: Why were the Sophists of very High demand in ancient Athens?



1.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit must have given you some ideas about classical criticism with particular reference to the history of Greeko-Roman criticism and Rhetoric. This unit must have helped you to gain a preliminary understanding of the larger issues and aspects of literary criticism. You have learnt how the different classical traditions of criticism evolved, how the important critics contributed to the development of criticism, how the historical situation provided the mainspring for such an evolution, and how one is supposed to understand the concept like Rhetoric. The discussion of the various concepts made in this unit, shall help you to understand the thinkers like Plato, Aristotle and Longinus, as well as the Neo-classical critics of the 18th century in the subsequent units of this course.



1.7 FURTHER READING

Habib, M A R. (2005). *A History of Literary Criticism*: *From Plato to the Present.* New Delhi: Blackwell Publishing.

Prasad, Birjadish. (1965). *An Introduction to English Criticism*. New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd.

Thomas, Keith. (Gen ed). (1999). *Greek Philosophers.* (Past Masters Series). UK: Oxford University Press.

Wimsatt, William K., & Brooks, Cleanth. (1957). *Literary Criticism*: *A Short History.* New Delhi: Alfred A. Knopf Inc.



1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Aristophanes brought the first regular criticism in the Western world… **…**in his comedy *The Frogs,* he made 'critical enquiry' the criterion to judge the merit of poetry and drama, and to identify the relative importance of morality in art and the choice of language … …this play deals with the relative merits of Aeschylus and Euripides, which also shows Aristophanes' familiarity with the kind of great literatures prior to him.

Ans to Q No 2: Plato dismissed the idea of mimesis thinking that it corrupts the poets with false ideas… … However, Aristotle makes mimesis the foundation of his views on poetry… …he asserts that the desire to imitate is basic in human beings… …imitation provides pleasures because it is more creative an act.

Ans to Q No 3: Socrates appears as a character/speaker through a kind of "Socratic conversations"… …Plato recreated Socrates as a fictional or dramatic character… …"the main point of the Dialogues in which Socrates confronts sophists is to bring out the contrast between his genuine philosophising and their counterfeit."

Ans to Q No 4: Plato opined that the poets should be banished from the ideal society, except perhaps those poetry which praise the gods… …Plato takes this severe position as he reacted against the views of sophists such as Gorgias and Thrasymachus who were less concerned with truth than with persuasion… … Plato held the view that poets are liars… …For Plato, epics and tragedy are based on a corrupting mythology.

Ans to Q No 5: Plato believed that it is not the main duty of poetry to dictate a favourable view of human behaviour and represent the

world correctly… …unlike Plato and Socrates, Aristotle makes imitation the foundation of his views on poetry… …Aristotle asserts that the desire to imitate is basic in man, provides pleasures to the imitators as well as his audience.

Ans to Q No 6: Horace was a Roman Classicist… …the Roman tradition in literary criticism begins with Horace… …he was both a critic and a creative writer… …"Epistle to Pisos" or *Ars Poetica* is the most important critical document written by Horace… …It drew heavily on Alexandrian poetic theory and Roman Rhetoric.

Ans to Q No 7: *Ars Poetica* is not a systematic treatise on poetry… ...however, it is an important treatise on the art of writing poetry, which aims to lay down rules and precepts for the guidance of would-be writers… …the aim of poetry, as held by Horace is both 'to instruct and to delight.'

Ans to Q No 8: The period was named after a new generation of Rhetoricians taking for their model, the language and style of classical Athens… …in this period, the speakers focused on style and delivery and Rhetorical ornamentation rather than everyday life and the actual affairs of the state… …the art of Rhetoric lost its public role because of its focus on formalisation of rules for literary composition… …Longinus's "On the Sublime" is the most influential Rhetorical text produced during the period.

Ans to Q No 9: The Sophists were the most influential Rhetoricians in ancient Greece… …many Sophists were specialised in using the tools of philosophy and Rhetoric, though others taught subjects such as Music, Athletics, and Mathematics. Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Lysias, and Isocrates were among the most influential of the Greek Sophists.

Ans to Q No 10: They used to teach young men about the art of speaking and the conduct of public debate… …they were of high demand for the kind of education and training they imparted… …as Rhetoric was an important component of their education, they helped to develop theories of Rhetoric.



1.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What is meant by the term Criticism? Give an account of the major premises of Greek criticism with particular reference to Plato and Aristotle.

Q 2: In what ways, did the tradition of classical criticism evolve? Discuss.

Q 3: What kind of intellectual and historical conditions provided a boost to the emergence of classical criticism? Discuss.

Q 4: Who are the Sophists and why did they mess up with the critics like Plato and Aristotle?

Q 5: Make a survey of Roman criticism and try to discuss the important concerns of the Roman critics.

Q 6: What is meant by the term Rhetoric? Write an account of the evolution of Rhetoric in ancient times with reference to some of the famous Rhetoricians.

Q 7: Explain the main facets of classical Greek criticism. Why, according to you, did critical enquiry become the main criterion to judge literature during that time?

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