

Research on the Classification of Western Literary Criticism Under M. H. Abrams' Fourfold Model

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This study explores the application of Abrams' Fourfold Model in the classification of Western literary criticism. Abrams' framework categorizes literary criticism into four fundamental elements: text, author, world, and audience. The text is viewed as an independent entity with intrinsic artistic value, necessitating a detailed analysis of its structure, style, themes, and symbols. Author study delves into the creator's life and socio-cultural context, often to uncover the work's deeper meanings. Contextual study situates the work within its historical and social milieu, examining its reflection of or response to societal norms and events. Audience response analysis considers the diverse interpretations shaped by readers' backgrounds, emphasizing the reader's role in constructing the work's meaning. The study concludes that Abrams' Fourfold Model offers a comprehensive and flexible analytical tool, enabling critics to engage with literary works from multiple perspectives, thereby enriching the understanding of literary complexity and diversity.

Keywords: literary criticism, textual analysis, author study, contextual study, audience response analysis, Abrams' Fourfold Model

Introduction

M. H. Abrams is a renowned literary critic and theorist in the United States. In his book *Mirror and Lamp: Romantic Literary Criticism*, he proposed a profound theoretical framework for literary criticism known as the Fourfold Model. This theory divides the focus of literary criticism into four main elements: text, author, world, and audience. Literary works themselves are the central object of criticism. In Abrams' theory, text exists independently and has its own value and meaning. Critics need to deeply analyze the structure, style, themes, symbols, and other elements of the text to understand its inherent artistic and aesthetic value. Writers are the main body of creating literary works. In some critical theories, the writer's life, background, intention, and creative motivation are considered key to understanding the work. By studying the personal experiences and creative process of writers, critics can better understand the deeper meaning and creative motivation of their works. The "world" here refers to the real world reflected or expressed in literary works. Literary works are often associated with specific historical, social, and cultural backgrounds. By analyzing the relationship between the work and the real world, critics can reveal the social significance and historical background of the work, and understand its value and influence in a specific cultural environment. Readers are the recipients and interpreters of literary works.

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The significance of literary works depends not only on the text itself, but also on the reader's reading experience and understanding. Different readers may have different interpretations and feelings; therefore, the subjective experience and response of readers are also important aspects of literary criticism, as Chen Cuiping (2000) said, "The standards of literary criticism have national characteristics" (p. 38).

Classification of Western Literary Criticism Theory

Abrams' Fourfold Model provides a multidimensional perspective for analyzing and understanding literary works, emphasizing the interactive relationship between text, author, world, and reader. This critical method is not only applicable to romantic literature, but can also be widely applied in modern and postmodern literary criticism to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity and diversity of literary works. The application of Abrams' Fourfold Model in literary criticism is mainly reflected in providing a comprehensive analytical framework to help critics examine and interpret literary works from different perspectives.

Textual Analysis

Critics will carefully read and analyze the text, focusing on elements such as language, style, structure, theme, symbolism, and metaphor. The purpose of this step is to understand the intrinsic aesthetic characteristics and artistic expression of the text. New Criticism is one of the most influential schools of literary criticism in 20th century English and American literature, emphasizing semantic analysis of literary works themselves, ignoring the author's life, intentions, and social historical background, and focusing on the internal structure and meaning of the text. The method of new criticism is to "read" the non-everyday use of language from the text, such as "irony", "tension", etc., and to analyze and explain the work in detail. Structuralist criticism seeks the internal order of a work through the analysis of its patterns and elements. It regards text as a relatively closed system, thus ignoring the factors of reality and society. The analytical methods of structuralism mainly include matrix analysis and agent analysis. Semiotics analysis methods focus on the functions of symbols and symbol systems in text. Based on linguistic foundations, it regards text as a system composed of symbols and analyzes how the symbols and structures of the text work together to produce meaning. Narratology explores the narrative techniques of artistic language, studying how stories are organized into a unified plot structure through storytelling. It includes story analysis, narrative perspective analysis, etc., focusing on aspects such as the narrator's role, perspective, voice, and narrative speed. Deconstructionism was proposed by Jacques Derrida and others. It opposes logocentrism, believing that texts are full of contradictions and oppositions and that meaning is not fixed but constantly changing and flowing. The deconstructivist approach enters from the edges of the text and subverts the usual meaning of the entire text.

Author Study

Next, critics may study the author's life, background, other works, and the socio-cultural environment during the creative period. This helps to reveal the author's creative intent and the deeper meaning of the work. Intentional fallacy: proposed in the mid-20th century, advocating ignoring the author's intention in literary criticism and focusing instead on the text itself. Wimsatt and Beardsley believed that the meaning of literary works should be sought from the text itself, rather than the author's inner thoughts or plans. Death of the author: a concept proposed by Roland Barthes that emphasizes the polysemy and independence of texts, believing that once a text is created, its meaning is no longer controlled by the author. This theory holds that the meaning of a text is created by the reader during the reading process. Psychoanalytic criticism applies Freud's psychoanalytic

theory to literary works, exploring how the author's unconscious motives influence their creation.

Contextual Study

Critics will examine their works within the social and cultural context of their creative period, analyzing how the works reflect or respond to social issues, historical events, and cultural trends at that time. Social and Historical Criticism believes that literature is closely related to social history, emphasizes that literature is a representation of social life, and advocates analyzing literary works in a specific social and historical context. Dana's "Philosophy of Art" is a foundational work in social and historical criticism, proposing that race, environment, and era play a decisive role in the development of literature. Cultural Criticism examines and analyzes literary works within their cultural environment, interpreting and evaluating them as cultural phenomena. It emphasizes that language and culture are part of social practice, with materiality, and focuses on the phenomenon of cultural industrialization and industrial culturalization. New Historicism Criticism emphasizes the interactive relationship between text and historical context, believing that the author's creation is the result of interaction with a specific historical context, and placing literary works in a broader social and cultural context for analysis. Feminist Criticism examines texts from a gender perspective, exploring gender roles, relationships, and gender politics within cultural contexts. Postcolonial Criticism focuses on literary works in colonial and postcolonial contexts, analyzing the expression of cultural identity, power relations, and colonial heritage in texts. Marxist Criticism focuses on the socio-economic structure and class relations in literary works, as well as how these factors affect the author's creation and interpretation of the text.

Readers' Response Analysis

Finally, critics will consider the different reactions and interpretations that different readers may have towards the work. This may include considering how readers' background, culture, gender, age, and other factors affect their understanding of the work. Reception aesthetics, also known as literary reception theory, emphasizes that the meaning of literary works arises during the reading process and is the result of the interaction between the works and the readers. Yao Si proposed that literary works are like musical scores, and their meanings constantly change in the performance of readers in different eras, as Zhang Kuizhi (2023) said, "literary criticism provides a commentary, separated from the readers and the author; it becomes a self-talk and monologue of critics" (p. 24). In this process of alienation from readers and authors, literary criticism, the effectiveness of evaluation has become a mere empty talk. Reader Response Criticism shifts attention from the text of a work to the reader's response, believing that the meaning of the work text is the reader's personal "product" or "creation", and focusing on analyzing the main factors that form the reader's response. Phenomenological literary theory, especially Ingarden's "Phenomenology of Reading" theory, holds that texts contain many underlying factors that need to be supplemented by readers' imagination during the reading process to form aesthetic objects. Hermeneutics focuses on the process of understanding and interpreting texts, including restorative hermeneutics that examines how texts are accepted and evaluated by contemporary readers, as well as skeptical hermeneutics that examines the various assumptions implied by texts and their authors.

Conclusion

M. H. Abrams's theory of the four elements of literature has had a profound inspiration on the theory of literary criticism. This theoretical paradigm provides a comprehensive and systematic analytical framework for literary criticism, allowing critics to examine literary works from different perspectives. Abrams believed that

the work is an autonomous entity that can be studied in isolation, and its meaning and value are not related to anything outside. This view emphasizes the independence and integrity of the work itself, prompting critics to pay more attention to the intrinsic characteristics of the work, making literary critical methods more diverse. This diversity helps critics choose the appropriate critical method according to different literary works and critical purposes. Abrams's theoretical paradigm emphasizes the dynamism and development of literary criticism. He pointed out that the four elements are not unchanging but produce different meanings as the theories they are situated in vary. This allows literary criticism to adapt to the ever-changing literary theories and practices, maintaining its vitality and relevance.

After completing the above steps based on Abrams' Fourfold Model, the critic will synthesize these different perspectives of analysis to form a comprehensive interpretation, as Gu Fengwei (2007) said, "Truly good literary works and beautiful works are original creations, and criticism of literary works is strictly speaking a problem of creation" (p. 38). This may involve exploring the interactions and influences between the text, author, world, and reader. Critics use critical thinking in the analytical process to question traditional perspectives, challenge existing explanations, and propose new insights or theories. Ultimately, critics will write critical articles based on their analysis and thinking, which may propose new interpretations, evaluate the value of the work, or reflect on literary criticism theory itself. Abrams' Fourfold Model provides a flexible framework that allows critics to choose their focus based on their research interests and critical purposes. For example, some critics may focus more on text analysis, while others may pay more attention to author research or reader feedback. Through this multi-dimensional analysis, literary criticism can gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and multidimensionality of literary works; however, it should be paid attention that "literary researchers need to move back and forth between disciplines" (2020, p. 150), as Gao Jianping said. Through these inspirations, Abrams's theory of the four elements of literature has not only provided a solid theoretical foundation for literary criticism but also promoted the innovation and development of literary critical methods.

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