

Theory of Literature
Rene Wellek and Austin Warren
(Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948)
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The 1944-46 collaboration between Rene Wellek and Austin Warren led to the publication of one of the most influential and comprehensive analysis in the field of literary theory, methodology and criticism. Their urge to provide an “organon” of method resulted in the coming of shape of *Theory of Literature*. Harcourt, Brace and Company first published the book in December 1948. In the Preface to the third edition of the book, it has been remarked that the book has been translated into Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, German, Portuguese, Hebrew and Gujarati. This explicitly evinces the impact of the book in 20th century literary scenario. *Theory of literature* is considered to be the first work to systematize literary theory. Though Wellek and Warren came from different backgrounds and training they believed that literary scholarship and criticism are compatible and literary study over all other things needs to be specifically literary.

The book is divided into four sections encompassing a wide range of subjects. The first part deals with definitions and distinctions. Here Wellek and Warren delve with the nature and function of literature, and there is a constant endeavour to distinguish between literature and literary study. In this section the book also deals with literary theory, history and criticism and it tries to show that these are inter dependent and cannot be put into watertight compartments. The final chapter in this section tries to give a definition of General Literature, Comparative Literature and National Literature and in the process it lays down the major characteristics of General, Comparative, and National Literature. While distinguishing between literature and literary study the book raises important questions of how does one deal intellectually with literary study? Can one use the general scientific ideals of objectivity in the study of art and specifically of literary art? One needs to keep in mind that literary scholarship has its own intellectual methods that are different from those of natural sciences. Literary history and criticism tries to characterise the individuality of literary art or in other words it attempts to

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reveal the literariness of any work of literature. The problems of identifying the nature and function of literature have been dealt with in details. Language is considered to be the material of literature and literature uses language in a particular way as opposed to the everyday and/scientific use of language. Scientific language is denotative; it aims at one-one correspondences while literary language is connotative. It is more expressive and pragmatic. The next important question that the book raises is about the function of literature and it starts with Horace's proposition of dulce and utile. In other words, poetry is both sweet and useful. Here useful signifies that it should not be a waste of time rather it should deserve serious attention and sweet refers to the fact that it should have its own reward. Further literature has its cognitive value, which is psychological. Keeping in mind Aristotle's *Poetics* one should remember the cathartic function of literature too. Thus one gets a discussion of the function of literature as it has emanated from the western world. One must not forget that fidelity to its own nature should be the prime function of any literary work of art. *Theory of Literature* drives home the point that literary history and literary criticism should not be divorced from each other. A work of art is both eternal and historical and if the critic loses the historical relationship then he would not be able to give judgements properly. The book tries to provide us with the definitions of General Literature, Comparative Literature and National Literature and deals with the idea of Goethe's Weltliteratur. It raises the problems of the term General Literature as used by Paul Van Tieghem who has used the term as a special concept in contrast to Comparative Literature. General Literature, for Paul Van Tieghem studies literature transcending national lines and Comparative Literature studies the interrelationship between two or more literatures. As is evident this creates major problems in demarcating the specific fields of both General and Comparative Literature. The second part of the book deals with the tasks of scholarship in assembling its materials, the undoing of the effects of time and the problems of authorship, date and authenticity. The task of assembling and cataloguing follows the tedious job of editing and the problems increase in the case of classical and medieval manuscripts. The book lays down the various problems of editing and the ways in which some of the problems can be mitigated.

The third section of the book analyses the extrinsic approach to the study of literature. Here those methods of studying literature have been laid down which concern themselves with its setting and environment. In short these are the external causes dealing with the social context. The extrinsic elements deal with the biographical approach, but one needs to

remember that the work of art is not simply an embodiment of experience but it is the latest work in a series of such works. Hence a novel or poetry is determined by the literary tradition. The biographical approach can only be helpful in unraveling certain allusions and words used in an author's work. The study of the psychology of the writer, the study of the creative process and the study of the psychological types present within the literary work also form important parts of the extrinsic approach to literary study. It tries to delve into the question of neurosis and its association with imagination and creativity. In short it tries to reveal how psychology works in enhancing the act of literary creation. Literature occurs within a social context, as part of a culture using language as its medium, which is in turn a social creation. The social origin of the writer plays a minor role since writers have often put themselves at the service of another class. The question of the economic basis of the literary production, the social ideology of the writer, the social purpose of the works of literature, the audience and the social influence of literature have been dealt with. Taine's famous triad of race, milieu and moment has led to an exclusive study of only the milieu. In order to get a 'real' picture of society literary materials need to be interpreted properly. Certain questions need to be addressed like the composition of the audience, i.e., which social group created a particular literary work and who is the target audience? Is literary art a mere document of social facts or is it a stylized art? One cannot afford to forget at the same time that literature does tell us something about the society and the time but it does so in its own way and the literary scholar and critic needs to unravel it in order to comprehend the relation between literature and society. Similarly the relation between literature and ideas is conceived of in different ways. Sometimes literature is thought of as a form of philosophy; the explicit statements and allusions in a literary work show the writer's or poet's allegiance to a specific philosophy. The book thus deals with large examples of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Dryden, Coleridge and Shelley in support of this argument. Literature has also been analysed to yield leading ideas and has been treated as a document in the history of ideas and philosophy. An important point has been raised here that instead of speculating on the problems of the philosophy of history the literary scholar and critic must try to get an insight of the how ideas actually enter into literature. How do they cease to be mere ideas and are incorporated within the literary texture of the work? The extrinsic approach to the study of literature also comprises of the relation between literature and the other arts, specifically music and the fine arts. Poetry has drawn inspiration from music, sculpture and painting. Literature has sometimes

tried to achieve the effects of painting and music and one can here cite the examples of Keats, Verlaine and Proust to name a few. Again the important question here is that the arts – literature, music and the plastic arts – have their individual evolution and therefore one needs to conceive them as a complex scheme of dialectical relationships working both ways and can be transformed within the art which they have entered. This would help us to understand the sum total of cultural activities and an intricate pattern of coincidences and divergences can be mapped in the process. The final section of the book deals with the intrinsic approach to literature. The book claims that the interpretation and analysis of the actual work of literature is the primary aim of literary scholarship. It is important to note that only the existence of the literary work creates our interest in either the life of the writer or his social milieu. *Theory of Literature* endeavours to bring the emphasis back on the analysis of the literary work itself and not on the setting and background of a work of literature. It critiques the shift from the study of literature to its historical background and it ascribes this shift to the specific socio-historical developments of the nineteenth century. In contrast to the emphasis on the setting and social context of a literary work one needs to recognise that the study of literature should first and foremost concentrate on the actual works of art. Thus the old methods of rhetoric, poetics and metrics need to be restated with full gusto. The role played by the Russian Formalists is important here, as they have brought back this impetus in the study of literature by turning the focus back on the work of literature itself. The distinction between form and content needs to be done away with since the two cannot be cloistered in watertight compartments. The work of art needs to be considered as a whole system of signs, or structure of signs, which serve a particular aesthetic purpose. The study of literature therefore needs to focus on the study of rhythm, euphony and metre, style and stylistics, image, metaphor, symbol and myth. In short, one has to analyse the formal linguistic structure of a work of literature. Literary genres are another significant area of investigation. It tries to raise important questions like does every work of literature belong to a specific genre? Do genres remain fixed? How does genre evolve across time? It analyses the different theories of genres across time starting from Aristotle and Horace. Genre needs to be conceived of as a grouping of literary works based on their inner and outer forms. The study of genre is important as it helps to comprehend the interrelationship between literary criticism and literary history; in short it gives a better understanding of the literary process as a whole. *Theory of Literature* also draws the attention of the literary scholar by giving a possibility of writing a literary history. It

views literary history as something which is simultaneously literary and history. It claims that most histories of literature are either social histories or histories of thought and/ judgements on specific works arranged chronologically. It raises an important question as to why there has been no attempt to trace the evolution of literature as an art? Also the literary historian needs to take cognizance of the problems of using terms derived from the rules of sovereign like Victorian, Edwardian and purely literary terms like Neo Classic and Romanticism. No work of art remains unchanged through the course of history. The literary situation changes with time hence there cannot be a single history of literature. Therefore the process of interpretation, criticism, and appreciation of literature needs to be dynamic and the task of the literary scholar and literary historian is to comprehend and trace this process.

The book thus incorporates wide range of topics and tries to provide a systematic way of studying and interpreting literature. It takes into cognizance Wellek's familiarity with Russian Formalism, the Prague Linguistic Circle and the German *Geistesgeschichte* and Stylistics and Warren's appreciation of the American New Criticism and the History of Criticism. *Theory of Literature* hinges on the point that the aesthetic fact cannot be divorced from the evaluation and criticism of literary work if the study of literature wants to be an all-encompassing one.