

A close-up, vertical view of the spines of several books in a library. The books are arranged in a row, with their spines showing varying shades of cream and beige. Some text is visible on the spines, including words like 'first', 'legal', 'he', 'ing', 'th.', 'ing', 'pen', 'said', 'pare', 'using', 'tute', and 'me'. The lighting is soft, creating a warm and scholarly atmosphere.

Language, Culture and Literature 2: Historical Approaches

HPFY3015 Language and Culture

The Historical Approach to Literature

- ‘Historical criticism’ or ‘the historical-critical method’: a branch of analysis oriented towards historical concerns.
- This approach involves viewing a literary work within its historical context.
- It seeks to examine the ways in which historical people and events, time periods, societal views, politics, and culture are reflected in a piece of literature AND/OR how they have influenced the writer of the text.

An 'Author-Centred' Approach

- Since historical criticism focuses on the cultural and historical setting of the author (and of the original or intended audience), it can be referred to as an '**author-centred**' approach. It is also often said to be concerned with the '**world behind the text**'.
- All literary communication involves three major components:

Author – Text – Reader

(if one of these elements is missing, communication is impossible!)

- In historical criticism, then, it is the first part of this formula that is the object of inquiry (**Author – Text – Reader**).

The Goals of Historical Criticism:

- to determine who wrote the text and when, where, how and why.
- to discover and learn about the social environment of the text (i.e. culture, politics, economics, customs, fashions, belief/value systems etc.) and to consider the ways in which the author has been influenced by that environment.
- to gain knowledge of the author's views of historical events and cultural trends of the time.

The Goals of Historical Criticism:

- to identify as far as possible the text's meaning within its original context.
- to understand why characters behave a certain way based on the historical context of the story.
- to enhance the reading because of the understanding the reader gains of the author's culture and society.

Questions to Ask:

- Where and when does the text come from? Who wrote it? Why did they write it?
- How does the work reflect the period in which it was written? What literary or historical influences helped to shape the work?
- What position is the author taking regarding the events or conditions of the time?
- What did the text mean for its original audience? What demands does it make on its audience (if any)?
- What were the common themes and motifs in the literature of the time period?
- How important is the historical context to interpreting the work?