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# M.H. ABRAMS' "ORIENTATION OF CRITICAL THEORIES"

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AN OUTLINE

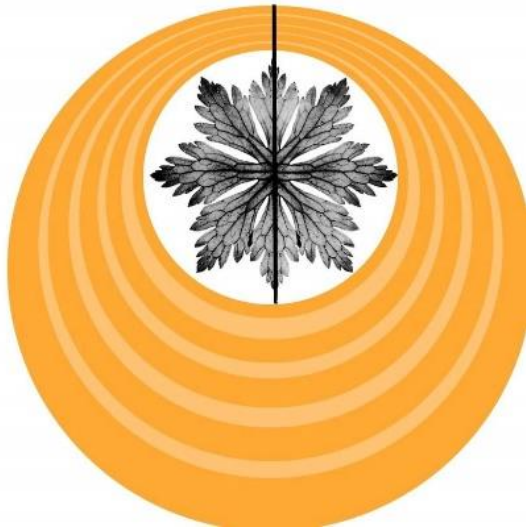


## INTRODUCTION

# the mirror and the lamp

romantic  
theory  
and the  
critical  
tradition

M. H. ABRAMS



### Meyer Howard (Mike) Abrams

His study of Romantic poetics *The Mirror and the Lamp: ROMANTIC THEORY AND THE CRITICAL TRADITION* (1953) is a classic of modern literary scholarship.

In his Preface, Professor Abrams explains: “The title of the book identifies two common and antithetical metaphors of mind, one comparing the mind to a reflector of external objects, the other to a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives. The first of these was characteristic of much of the thinking from Plato to the eighteenth century; the second typifies the prevailing Romantic conception of the poetic mind.”

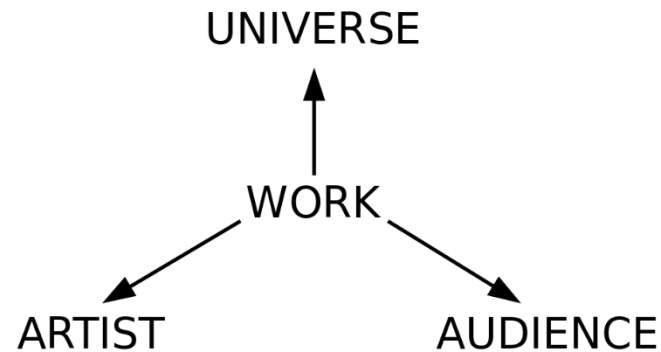
### Publications

- ❖ *The Poetry of Pope: A Selection*
- ❖ *Literature and Belief: English Institute Essays*
- ❖ *A Glossary of Literary Terms*
- ❖ *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*
- ❖ *Norton Anthology of English Literature*
- ❖ *The Milk of Paradise: The Effect of Opium Visions on the Works of De Quincy, Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and Coleridge*
- ❖ *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*
- ❖ *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism*
- ❖ *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*
- ❖ *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem: And Other Essays*

## Chapter I- “Introduction: Orientation of Critical Theories”

Provides a concise history of criticism and a simple diagrammatic scheme for discriminating various kinds of critical theory and practice.

- ❖ A triangular representation of four Co-ordinates of Art Criticism is-



- ❖ Co-ordinates are not constants but variables
- ❖ One co-ordinate always remains prominent, which decides the focus of the critic, but this prominence does not eliminate other three co-ordinates.

❖ **Approaches to Literary Criticism according to the Co-ordinates of Art Criticism**

THEORY	MIMETIC THEORY
FOCAL POINT	UNIVERSE
INTEREST	relationship between the Work and the Universe
THRUST	<p>Views literary works as reflections of life, in terms of the “truth” of its representation of reality- the reality of the world and of human life and character</p> <p>or</p> <p>Views the literary work as an imitation/ reflection/ representation of the world and human life</p> <p>Primary criterion applied to a work is the “truth” and “adequacy” of its representation to the matter it represents/ should represent</p> <p>Assumes or insists that literary works reflect reality</p> <p>Parallel terms-Representation, Counterfeiting, Feigning, Copy, Image</p>
HISTORY	Began as an attack on Literature by Plato, adapted by Aristotle (in a qualified way) as a defence of literature, and is the basis of modern theories of literary realism
ROLE OF CRITIC	Judge a work on its ability to accurately represent its subject matter

THEORY	PRAGMATIC THEORY
FOCAL POINT	AUDIENCE: the listeners, spectators, or readers
INTEREST	relationship between the Work and the Audience
THRUST	<p>Focuses on a work as something designed to produce certain emotional and moral responses in the reader (such as aesthetic pleasure, instruction or kinds of emotion) and on how those effects are produced</p> <p>or</p> <p>Emphasizes the artistic strategies by which an author engages and influences the responses of readers to the matters represented in a literary work</p>
HISTORY	<p>Can be traced back to the versified <i>Ars Poetica</i> or <i>The Art of Poetry</i> by the Roman Horace (first century BC)</p> <p>Dominant approach up through the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, has received fresh impetus in the latter part of 20<sup>th</sup> Century, esp. in the work of critic Wayne Booth</p> <p>Also adopted by some structuralists who analyse a literary text as a systematic play of codes that produce the interpretative responses of a reader</p> <p>similar/ revived to rhetorical criticism</p>
ROLE OF CRITIC	Judge a work on the basis of an author's success in making the audience/ reader respond in the manner he wanted

THEORY	EXPRESSIVE THEORY
<b>FOCAL POINT</b>	ARTIST, the artificer
<b>INTEREST</b>	relationship between the Work and the Artist
<b>THRUST</b>	Focuses on literary work as an expression of the individuality of the writer, rather focusing on the work as an art object or on its effect on a reader
<b>HISTORY</b>	<p>Romantic critics Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth</p> <p>Currently practised in the writings of psychological and psychoanalytic critics and in critics of consciousness such as Georges Poulet and the Geneva School</p>
<b>ROLE OF CRITIC</b>	Judge the work by its sincerity/ genuineness/ adequacy to the poet's individual vision/ state of mind; and it often looks in the work for evidences of the particular temperament and experiences of the author, who, consciously/ unconsciously, has revealed himself in it

<b>THEORY</b>	<b>OBJECTIVE THEORY</b>
<b>FOCAL POINT</b>	WORK OF ART, the artistic product itself
<b>INTEREST</b>	close reading of the Work
<b>THRUST</b>	<p>Focuses on the intrinsic qualities of a work, rather than on the work's relationship to the life of its author, to the time in which it was written, or to its effect on a reader</p> <p>Literary product- self-sufficient, autonomous object, world-in-itself</p>
<b>HISTORY</b>	The conception of self-sufficiency of an aesthetic object was proposed in Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, and was taken up by proponents of art for art's sake in the latter part of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century and then by New Critics, the Chicago School, and proponents of European formalism
<b>ROLE OF CRITIC</b>	Contemplated as its own end and to be analysed and judged solely by "intrinsic" criteria such as its complexity, coherence, equilibrium, integrity and the interrelations of its component elements

## Conclusion

- ❖ The essay constitutes the best possible introduction to the study of modern criticism.
- ❖ Abrams clearly identifies himself as a critical theorist, and not as a philosopher/ psychologist/ scientist.
- ❖ According to him, the purpose and function of critical theory is not to discover some "verifiable truth" but to "establish principles enabling us to justify, order, and clarify our interpretation and appraisal of the aesthetic.
- ❖ Abrams has analysed the growth of criticism thematically, chronologically, historically and critically.
- ❖ This wins a special place for him in the genre of criticism.

## References

- Abrams, M.H. "Introduction: Orientation of Critical Theories." *The Mirror and the Lamp: ROMANTIC THEORY AND THE CRITICAL TRADITION*, OUP, 1953, pp. 3- 29.
- Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, Cengage Learning India Pvt. Ltd., 2009, pp. 60- 63.



## **Recommended Reading**

- [https://www.academia.edu/28904248/Critical\\_Theories\\_Abrams](https://www.academia.edu/28904248/Critical_Theories_Abrams)
- [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301228266\\_Four\\_critical\\_theories\\_from\\_view\\_point\\_of\\_MHAbrams](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301228266_Four_critical_theories_from_view_point_of_MHAbrams)
- <http://worldltonline.net/july-06/article1.pdf>
- <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1076&context=ijls>
- [https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/1181761/116638\\_Van\\_Rooden\\_Magnifying\\_the\\_Mirror\\_and\\_the\\_Lamp.pdf](https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/1181761/116638_Van_Rooden_Magnifying_the_Mirror_and_the_Lamp.pdf)
- <http://learningliteratureoverhere.blogspot.com/2016/12/orientation-of-critical-theories-mh.html>
- <http://sreekumarenglishliterature.blogspot.com/2016/10/orientation-of-critical-theories.html>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M.\\_H.\\_Abrams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M._H._Abrams)

## **Additional Web Links**

- <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/15/the-fourth-dimension-of-a-poem>
- [https://www.ithaca.com/news/cornell-s-m-h-abrams-marking-th-birthday-with-book/article\\_edc94ca8-d063-11e1-9099-0019bb2963f4.html](https://www.ithaca.com/news/cornell-s-m-h-abrams-marking-th-birthday-with-book/article_edc94ca8-d063-11e1-9099-0019bb2963f4.html)
- <https://www.ithacajournal.com/story/news/local/2015/08/18/abrams-memorial-cornell-university/31917539/>
- <http://cornellalumnimagazine.com/a-literary-century/>
- <https://web.archive.org/web/20080704151109/http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/March08/Abrams.mosaic.sr.html>
- [https://www.syracuse.com/news/2012/07/the\\_man\\_behind\\_the\\_norton\\_anth.html](https://www.syracuse.com/news/2012/07/the_man_behind_the_norton_anth.html)
- <https://ithacavoices.com/2015/04/one-greatest-professors-cornell-history-died/>

## [Blurb on the back of the book for Reviews](#)

LITERARY CRITICISM



One of the five "works published within the last thirty years which in the opinion of representative scholars and critics have contributed most to the understanding of literature."

—LEWIS LEARY, *Contemporary Literary Scholarship*

"Mr. Abrams has written a remarkable book on the history of criticism, the most distinguished contribution of American scholarship in that field since the work of J. E. Spingarn. . . ."

—RENÉ WELLEK, *Comparative Literature*

"The book is so rich in thought that it is invaluable for students of the romantic movement and indeed of the whole theory of criticism. I regard it as one of the most distinguished achievements of American literary scholarship of our day."

—THOMAS M. RAYSOR, *Modern Philology*

"With this book, M. H. Abrams has given us a remarkable study, admirably conceived and executed, a book of quite exceptional and no doubt lasting significance for a number of fields—for the history of ideas and comparative literature as well as for English literary history, criticism and aesthetics."

—HARRY BERGHOLZ, *Modern Language Journal*

"The past forty years have seen many attempts at ordering our ideas about literature; *The Mirror and the Lamp* stands out among them as a unique combination of rich historical scholarship and hard-won clarity of thought."

—*The Times Literary Supplement*

M. H. Abrams is Class of 1916 Professor of English at Cornell University. He is the editor of *English Romantic Poets* (GB 35), and the author of *The Milk of Paradise* and *Natural Supernaturalism*. In 1954, *The Mirror and the Lamp* was awarded the Christian Gauss Prize.

*Thank you*



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