

Knowledge and Its Impact on Contextual Literary Criticism Approaches

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Abstract:

This study examines the relationship between knowledge and contextual critical approaches in literary criticism, highlighting the central role of epistemology in guiding the humanities in general and literary criticism in particular. It also introduces the concept of epistemology, its philosophical origins, and its connection to the term “epistemology” as a discipline. The paper demonstrates how literary criticism has benefited from various fields of human knowledge—such as history, sociology, and psychology—in the construction of its methodologies and the analysis of literary texts. Furthermore, it argues that the incorporation of these disciplines has contributed to a deeper understanding of texts and to situating them within their cultural and social contexts. The study concludes that knowledge constitutes the methodological foundation that grants literary criticism its scientific depth and its capacity to interpret and evaluate literary phenomena.

Keywords: Knowledge; Epistemology; Theory of Knowledge; Literary Criticism; Contextual Approaches.

Introduction:

Epistemology occupies a distinguished position in modern and contemporary studies due to its close connection to the human being. Knowledge is regarded as one of the psychological and existential functions that humans strive to attain. For this reason, all revealed religions have emphasized the necessity of understanding the world surrounding humankind, urging the pursuit of knowledge as a fundamental imperative.

Modern philosophy has been characterized by the emergence of numerous intellectual currents and diverse philosophical trends, all revolving around epistemology, which may rightly be considered the central problem of the modern age—an era that can be described as the golden age of epistemology (Al-Sukkari, 1999, p. 20). It constitutes the foundation and essence of the humanities. While all humans seek knowledge by virtue of their nature, it is this very knowledge that liberates the human mind from illusion, frees the self from isolation, and corrects behavior from error. It also enables individuals to distinguish truth from falsehood, honesty from deceit, correctness from mistake, the good from the corrupt, and virtue from evil (Al-Sukkari, 1999, pp. 20–21).

The relationship between knowledge and literary criticism is a close and dynamic one, grounded in interaction and complementarity. Literary criticism cannot achieve its aims of understanding, analyzing, and evaluating texts without relying on broad and diverse knowledge.

Knowledge constitutes the fundamental tool upon which the critic depends to uncover the aesthetic and intellectual structures embedded within a literary work. It also enables the critic to grasp its deeper meanings and relate them to their historical and cultural contexts. By employing multiple fields of knowledge—such as linguistics, rhetoric, history, philosophy, and the human sciences—literary criticism becomes more capable of interpreting texts and analyzing their artistic and intellectual components objectively.

Moreover, knowledge facilitates moving beyond superficial readings toward a conscious and critical engagement that reveals the aesthetic and semantic dimensions of the text. Accordingly, the development of literary criticism throughout history has been closely linked to the evolution of knowledge and the intellectual methodologies upon which critics rely. From this perspective, the importance of knowledge emerges as a methodological foundation that guides the critical process and endows it with scientific and cognitive depth. Thus, the centrality of knowledge becomes evident in shaping a critical vision capable of understanding and evaluating literary texts within a broad cultural and intellectual framework.

1. Epistemology: Concept and Origins

Epistemology is as old as philosophy itself, even though it did not emerge as an independent field of study until about three centuries ago in Western thought. Perhaps the first significant attempt in the history of philosophy in this domain was undertaken by the English philosopher John Locke, who was the first to formulate this field as an autonomous discipline in his work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published at the end of the seventeenth century in 1690. This work is considered the first systematic scientific study to examine the origin of knowledge, its nature, its limits, and the degree of certainty it affords (Al-Nashshar, 1995, p. 27).

The issues addressed within epistemology are numerous, yet they generally fall under three fundamental areas of inquiry:

The first concerns the **possibility of knowledge**. This line of inquiry engages with skepticism and seeks to answer key questions such as: Is the human being capable of knowing all things? And can one be confident in the truth of one's perceptions and the validity of one's knowledge? (Al-Sukkari, 1999, p. 32).

The second area addresses the **sources of knowledge**, examining the means through which knowledge is acquired. It attempts to answer questions such as: How does a person come to know the objects around them? How do we know this book, that tree, or a particular table? Is knowledge derived through the senses, through reason, or through intuition? (Al-Sukkari, 1999, p. 32).

The third area focuses on the **nature of knowledge**, particularly whether it is idealistic or realistic in essence. It seeks to respond to questions such as: Is the fabric of knowledge—its underlying structure—of an ideal nature, or is it grounded in reality? (Al-Sukkari, 1999, p. 32).

From these areas of inquiry, one can discern the importance that scholars have attributed to knowledge. It has long been their central concern, opening the way for the exercise of reason across various fields of science through the adoption of diverse methodologies aimed at attaining truth. This endeavor lies at the very heart of philosophical thinking.

Accordingly, definitions of epistemology have multiplied and diversified, owing to its close association with philosophy—a domain that cannot be confined within fixed boundaries or assigned a definitive end. This has led to considerable variation in its definitions, particularly between French and English traditions, as well as to terminological overlaps with what is known as *epistemology*, a matter that will be clarified later. Nevertheless, the general concept of epistemology may be defined as the science that investigates “the nature of human knowledge, its value, its instruments, and the issues related to it, such as its stages, limits, and obstacles” (Al-‘Amili, 1990, p. 3). It is among the fields that have received significant attention in recent centuries, especially in Western thought, where it has been endowed with a forward-looking, progressive character.

The multiplicity of definitions surrounding epistemology reflects the richness and fertility of studies devoted to this subject. Consequently, research in any scientific field has become methodologically linked to epistemology, which serves as both the point of departure and the ultimate horizon of inquiry.

2. Epistemology and Theory of Knowledge:

Philosophers and scholars have approached the two terms—*epistemology* and *theory of knowledge*—from two main perspectives. The first considers them synonymous, attributing to both the same philosophical and cognitive meaning, a view predominantly represented by English-speaking scholars (Al-Sukkari, 1999, p. 29). The second distinguishes between the two terms, a position particularly associated with French thinkers (Kamel, p. 475). These two positions may be outlined as follows:

a. The First Position: This perspective equates the use of the terms *epistemology* and *theory of knowledge*, viewing their relationship as analogous to that between species and genus. Epistemology, in this sense, focuses on a specific type of knowledge—namely, scientific knowledge—whereas the theory of knowledge examines the principles of knowledge in general. This view is exemplified by Jean Piaget, who maintained that knowledge is in a state of continuous development and never reaches completion. Accordingly, any epistemology that investigates this development ultimately becomes a theory of knowledge (Al-Sukkari, 1999, p. 29).

This position is further supported by the definition provided by Runes in his dictionary, where he states: “Theory of knowledge (epistemology) is that branch of philosophy which studies the origin, structure, methods, and validity of knowledge” (Dagobert D. Runes, p. 145).

It is also well known that the term *epistemology* was introduced by the Scottish philosopher J. F. Ferrier, who first employed it in 1854 in his work *Institutes of Metaphysics*, where he distinguished within philosophy between the study of being (ontology) and the study of knowledge (epistemology) (Al-Sukkari, 1999, p. 28).

b. The Second Position: In contrast, French scholars have drawn a clear distinction between *theory of knowledge* and *epistemology*, based on the etymological definition of the latter. The term *epistemology* derives from the Greek *epistēmē* (knowledge or science) and *logos* (theory or study), thus literally meaning “the theory of science” or “the theory of scientific knowledge.” It is characterized by the breadth of its subject matter, as it constitutes a critical

study concerned with the principles, hypotheses, and results of various sciences, aiming to determine their logical origins and objective value (Qasim, 1986, p. 253).

This second perspective is represented by the French philosopher André Lalande. In his dictionary, he defines *theory of knowledge* (*Théorie de la connaissance*) as “the study of the relationship between the subject and the object in the act of knowing” (Lalande, 1972, p. 48). As for *epistemology*, he defines it as “the philosophy of the sciences, but in a specific sense... fundamentally, it is the critical study of the principles, hypotheses, and results of the various sciences” (Al-Sukkari, 1999, p. 31).

Despite the possibility of distinguishing between the two terms in French and English lexicons, it is often difficult in practice to maintain such a distinction due to the overlap in their meanings and conceptual domains. Consequently, the English usage—which does not differentiate between the two—has become more widespread and practically applicable, especially considering that a significant portion of contemporary epistemological inquiry is characterized by its scientific orientation, often referred to as scientific knowledge.

It can be concluded from the foregoing that once knowledge of ourselves and of our Creator begins to take shape, the foundations of what is now termed epistemology and its sources start to emerge. Knowledge, in its broadest sense, originates from investigating the relationship between the Creator and the created, and from the human endeavor to comprehend the world that surrounds them.

3. Knowledge and Criticism:

Criticism is intrinsically linked to knowledge, as it cannot dispense with its diverse forms. Muhammad Mandur defines criticism as “the art of studying texts and distinguishing styles, an art that draws upon various kinds of knowledge” (Mandur, 1988, p. 188). Criticism in general has been profoundly influenced by the sciences that have intersected with it, shaping its methodologies and directing its studies toward specific orientations. This influence is particularly evident in literary criticism, which has made use of multiple fields of knowledge as essential tools.

Literary criticism has greatly benefited from historical knowledge, as critics have employed political and social events as means to interpret literature and explain its phenomena. The historical method is one of the oldest and most established critical approaches, grounded in solid principles derived from philosophical knowledge and intellectual currents that have accompanied humanity throughout its long trajectory. It is “a method that takes political and social historical events as a means of interpreting literature and explaining its phenomena” (Waghilisi, 2007, p. 15). It establishes a connection between the literary work, the time in which it emerges, and the environment in which it is shaped. Thus, it aids in explaining the formation of literary trends and in understanding the motives and influences behind the emergence of literary phenomena and movements associated with society, based on the principle that “man is the product of his environment.”

The historical method began to take shape in the early nineteenth century, a period during which Europe entered a phase of scientific renaissance marked by remarkable advances in experimental sciences. These developments had a significant impact on society and across various fields of knowledge. Sociologists, psychologists, and moral philosophers sought to

adopt these scientific theories and their outcomes in their methodologies (Huwaidi, 2005, p. 71). For instance, the renowned French critic Brunetière attempted to apply Darwin's theory of evolution to literature and literary genres, much like Herbert Spencer had done in sociology, ethics, and psychology. In his work *The Evolution of Literary Genres* (1890), Brunetière argued that "literature is divided into genres analogous to living organisms, which grow and evolve from simplicity to complexity over successive periods until they reach maturity, after which they may decline and disappear, just as certain biological species have become extinct" (Waghilisi, 2007, p. 17).

Similarly, social criticism subjected literary works to sociological knowledge, considering literature a social phenomenon produced by the writer for their society, with the reader present in the writer's mind as both means and end (Huwaidi, 2005, p. 95). Social criticism thus "seeks to highlight the social content of literary works, to trace their origins, and to determine the extent to which the writer succeeds in depicting the social, economic, historical, and moral conditions in which they lived. It also encourages writers to reflect these lived realities in their works" (Akasha, 1985, p. 22). Consequently, this approach often requires the writer to transcend the confines of literature and engage directly with society, expressing positions on its issues and concerns.

The first systematic social study of literature is generally attributed to Madame de Staël in the early nineteenth century, whose work *Literature Considered in Its Relation to Social Institutions* established the principle that literature is an expression of society (Huwaidi, 2005, p. 94). Her approach was further developed by Hippolyte Taine in *History of English Literature*, where he analyzed literature through his famous triad: race, environment, and moment. Among these, the element of environment held particular importance, as it shapes the literary milieu through factors such as types of work, economic conditions, and social structures. Thus, understanding any literary work requires familiarity with the broader social context and prevailing traditions of its environment (Akasha, 1985, p. 13).

However, it was Karl Marx who provided the social theory of literature with its most systematic methodological framework and mature intellectual form. His theory evolved into a comprehensive philosophical vision of both literature and social development. This does not diminish the contributions of other thinkers such as Hegel, Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, John Stuart Mill, Plekhanov, Lukács, Henri Lefebvre, and Lucien Goldmann, among others (Huwaidi, 2005, p. 94).

Psychology has also played a significant role in shaping critical studies, directing them toward an understanding of the psychological processes underlying literary creativity. By probing the inner self of the writer, critics have drawn on psychological knowledge to analyze literary production. Literary criticism has benefited from psychology in identifying the personality of the author and framing it through the analysis of psychological states reflected in confessions, letters, and conversations (Muhammad, 1987, p. 131). This has enabled critics to establish connections between the author's personality and their literary works.

The psychological method seeks to interpret literature on a psychological basis. It involves studying psychological patterns within literary works and the laws governing them (Al-Raqab, 2007, p. 91). This underscores the strong relationship between literature and psychological knowledge, as literature serves as a reflection of both mind and soul. The writer,

in all creative activity, draws upon intellectual and emotional experiences; in this sense, the writer becomes a mirror of the intellect and psyche of literature itself (Atiq, 1972, p. 295).

The application of psychological knowledge to literature became more prominent in the early twentieth century, particularly with Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which marked the beginning of psychoanalytic literary studies. Freud's contributions to understanding creativity and the relationship between artistic production and its creator are foundational (Akasha, 1985, p. 112). He led the psychoanalytic school through his extensive work, supported by his students, most notably Alfred Adler (1870–1937) and Carl Jung (1875–1961).

Freud posited that the psyche is structured around three forces: the *id* (the biological component, representing inherited instincts), the *ego* (the psychological or conscious dimension, responsible for mental images and dreams), and the *superego* (the social or moral dimension, often referred to as conscience) (Mukhtari, 1998, p. 10). The continuous conflict among these forces manifests in human behavior, including artistic and literary expression.

Subsequent psychologists revised Freud's theories. Adler, founder of individual psychology, emphasized the drive for power and self-assertion as the primary motivation behind artistic creation, linking psychological disorders to feelings of inferiority. Jung, founder of analytical psychology, attributed artistic creativity to the unconscious, distinguishing between the personal unconscious (central to Freud's analyses) and the collective unconscious, which contains inherited experiences and archetypes representing the primordial patterns of human thought (Jung, 1997, p. 7). For Jung, this collective unconscious is the true source of artistic production.

The psychoanalytic school has provided valuable contributions to literature and art by equipping criticism with psychological tools to analyze authors' personalities and to uncover the deeper structures and meanings of literary works.

For this reason, it has become essential for critics to be well-equipped with knowledge if their judgments are to hold value. Throughout history, critics have not relied solely on innate talent and intelligence; rather, they have emphasized the necessity of broad cultural knowledge encompassing history, philosophy, logic, psychology, sociology, and linguistics. As one critic aptly states: "The true critic—whose talents are refined by experience, whose expertise is shaped by reading, and whose sensibilities are developed through practice—is capable of distinguishing between harmonious rhythm and discordant sound... He is both influenced and influential; he assimilates, transforms, and gives. He shares in the experiences of his society and creates in accordance with the vitality of his inner being" (Hassan, 1996, pp. 7–8).

A critic lacking serious cultural grounding can produce only superficial and naïve criticism, devoid of effectiveness, innovation, and contribution, regardless of their intelligence or sensitivity. Criticism, at its core, is a cultural construct that reflects the extent of the critic's intellectual nourishment.

From all the above, it becomes clear that what connects criticism to the many domains of knowledge is the **method** adopted by the critic as a guiding tool to illuminate the complexities and secrets of the literary text. This underscores the close relationship between knowledge and methodology. Method is the means by which one seeks truth and acquires knowledge. As Taha Jabir Al-Alwani states, it is "the science of clarifying the path and the necessary steps to traverse

it toward a defined cognitive goal, with concepts serving as its fundamental building blocks” (Al-Alwani, 1995, p. 64). No form of knowledge can exist without method; the two are inseparable, progressing side by side. Accordingly, for any الأمة (nation) to possess a methodology, it must first possess knowledge and contribute to its development through creativity and innovation.

The growing emphasis on methodology has been further stimulated by the remarkable progress of the human sciences and the valuable results they have achieved. This has led some critics to advocate for the adoption of their methods and findings in literary criticism, in the hope of enriching the field and advancing it further (Al-‘Omrani, 1988, p. 99).

Conclusion: This study demonstrates that knowledge constitutes the foundational basis upon which the critical process is built, and that literary criticism cannot develop or evolve in isolation from the various fields of knowledge that provide it with the tools and perspectives necessary for understanding and analyzing texts. Since its philosophical origins, epistemology has reflected humanity’s concern with defining the nature, sources, and limits of knowledge—an endeavor that has, in turn, significantly influenced critical studies, enabling them to construct their methodologies and shape their approaches to literary texts. The study also reveals that the relationship between knowledge and literary criticism is one of interaction and complementarity. Diverse forms of knowledge—such as history, sociology, psychology, and philosophy—have contributed to the formation of contextual critical approaches that seek to interpret literary texts in light of their conditions of production and their cultural, social, and psychological contexts. This intellectual interplay has broadened the horizons of literary criticism, enhancing its capacity to uncover the aesthetic and intellectual dimensions of texts, and allowing it to move beyond impressionistic or superficial readings. Accordingly, the literary critic is required to possess a broad and solid body of knowledge that enables the conscious and effective application of various methodologies. Knowledge thus becomes an essential tool for understanding, interpreting, and evaluating literary texts. True criticism is not merely a matter of impression or personal taste; rather, it is a scientific and cultural practice grounded in a clear methodology and enriched by multiple sources of knowledge. Therefore, the development of contextual literary criticism remains closely tied to the advancement of human knowledge itself. Every expansion in the domains of knowledge opens new horizons for critical inquiry and analysis. Knowledge thus remains the fundamental pillar that endows literary criticism with its methodological depth and scientific effectiveness, enabling it to contribute meaningfully to the interpretation of literary texts and to reveal their aesthetic and intellectual value within their broader cultural and civilizational contexts.

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