

# Literary Criticism

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Literary criticism of the Gospels is concerned with literary conventions and the significance of such conventions for meaning. The rationale for such an approach is twofold: (1) the Gospels are, in part, literary; and (2) a reading or hearing of the Gospels involves literary appreciation. The Gospels are also theological, of course, and historical. Theological and historical preunderstandings of Christians will influence their use of literary criticism. Literary criticism and appreciation also impinge on theological and historical considerations.

This essay will survey the variety of literary approaches and suggest how they help in studying the Gospels, show how the history of the study of Jesus and the Gospels has intersected literary study, and delineate and illustrate major literary conventions and strategies of the Gospels and their study.

1. Literary Criticism and Its Implications for Study of the Gospels
2. Developments in Gospel Study from a Literary Perspective
3. The Gospels and Literary Conventions and Strategies

## **1. Literary Criticism and Its Implications for Study of the Gospels**

Christian appropriation of literary criticism does not mean the reduction of the Gospels to any one or a group of literary perspectives. The Gospels are presentations of the «good news» of Jesus Christ. But just as an understanding of the rules of Greek grammar and syntax help in reading the Gospels so does an understanding of literary rules and conventions.

### **1.1. The History and Theory of Criticism**

#### **1.1.1. The History of Criticism**

Literary criticism offers a variety of perspectives for the study of the Gospels, for in the history of criticism different views of the reference, role and function of literature have guided the work of criticism. An early type of criticism (mimetic criticism) views the literary work as an imitation (*mimesis*) of the world and human life. The primary criterion is the truth of the work in relation to the object or objects it represents. This form of criticism is associated with the classical age, but it is also characteristic of contemporary theories of literary realism, and Marxist critics in particular view literature as a reflection of reality.

The criticism which was dominant from the poet Horace (first century BC) through the eighteenth century (pragmatic criticism) emphasizes the effect of the work on the audience, including both pleasure and instruction. Recent revival of rhetorical criticism recapitulates pragmatic criticism's emphasis on the artistic strategies used by an author in engaging and influencing the response of readers.

Another type (expressive criticism) defines the literary work in terms of the operation of the artist's imagination on his or her perception. Contemporary psychologically oriented critics retain concerns of expressive criticism, looking in the work for indications of the particular temperament and experiences of the author.

Extrinsic criticism of various sorts explains the major characteristics of a work of art in terms of external causes or influences (historical, biographical, sociological, psychological and so on). The historical and sociological approaches of conventional biblical study are examples of extrinsic criticism. Formalism and New Criticism (termed «objective» criticism) reacts to the alleged reduction of literature to external causes and approaches the work in terms of the work itself as an autonomous object, to be judged in terms of intrinsic criteria such as coherence, integrity, equilibrium, complexity and the relationships of the parts of the work to each other and to the work as a whole. Reader-oriented theories relativize the conventional view of the literary work as a structure of meaning which has been achieved and exists apart from the reader's involvement. They emphasize the role of the reader (or readership) alongside the role of the author in the «production» or «creation» of meaning and significance.

#### **1.1.2. The Theory of Criticism**

##### **1.1.2.1. A Compass for Criticism: Internal and External Relationships**

The fact that readers of different epochs and different readers of the same epoch can read and interpret literature differently is explained in part by the nature of literature itself. Literature consists not only of a succession of words, sentences and paragraphs; it consists also of presuppositions and perspectives taken by writers and readers.

One set of relationships in literature (syntagmatic relationships) is comparable to the syntactic relationships on the level of sentence. These relationships exist *within* discourse and enable linguistic and literary elements to have meaning as they are *combined* or chained together in a linear sequence. In Gospel narrative readers must discern relationships between words and sentences within smaller units of the Gospels such as parables and miracle stories in order to follow what is being said, and readers must discern relationships between these units in order to follow the plot of the Gospels as completed wholes.

Relationships outside any particular discourse are necessary for making sense of the combinations within that discourse. The topic, reference, literary category and function of the literary unit are discerned not simply from words and sentences and their combination. The topic of a sentence, for example, must be consistent with the combination of words, but the same combination can be assigned different topics. The specific topic is decided on in the context of discourse.

### **1.1.2.2. Interdependence and variety of Relationships**

In the episode of Jesus and the disciples crossing the lake in Mark 8, Jesus told the disciples, «Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod!» The disciples recognized a syntactic and semantic unity; they made sense of the sentence by judging that Jesus' statement was to be taken literally and that he was speaking about bread--the bread which the disciples failed to bring with them. Readers know more than the disciples knew, and they know the topic is not bread--not bread in the simple literal sense in which the disciples understood it.

At the level of every literary unit some topic must be discerned. Then, at the level of the total literary work, a comprehensive organizing principle or idea must be formulated in order for the identification of topics and relationships throughout the work and, therefore, for the meaning of the work as a whole. The topic of the subordinate unit and the idea of the work as a whole must be consistent with the literary data, but the interplay of literal, figurative and often paradoxical meanings of words and other units makes the literary data susceptible to a variety of meanings. The same word, expression or entire text can signify two or more distinct references and express and elicit different attitudes or feelings.

More than topics and ideas are involved in literary appreciation. The form and content of literature do not simply convey information; they perform action. The contrast between the discernment of the readers and the intellectual and spiritual density of the disciples has an ironic function in Mark 8. This irony has an effect upon the readers and is characteristic of the Gospel. The knowing readers come to feel superior to the simple disciples as they share the point of view of the Evangelist. Readers are nudged toward the faith of the Evangelist in the literary composition. The ironic function and the discernment of topics are related. As readers discern different levels of meaning in Mark, they may see that what the disciples think is the topic is closer to the truth than readers initially realize. Readers may eventually discern that bread (at a symbolic level) is indeed the theme (or at least one of the ways that the theme of the Gospel may be expressed).

## **1.2. Study of Narrative**

In the past literary aspects of Gospel narratives were subordinated to dogmatic and historical interests. Since the late 1960s, however, literary aspects of narrative have increasingly become the center of interest, with the subordination of dogmatic and historical concerns. As has been noted, however, dogmatic and historical preunderstandings play their appropriate part in literary study. Certainly no literary ideology will be allowed to replace Christian faith. S. McKnight rightly points out the danger of equating the poetic creativity of the Evangelists with fiction and depreciating «the importance of the real author's intent, historical reference, and background information for understanding texts» (S. McKnight, 127).

### **1.2.1. Conventional Emphases**

In Aristotle's mimetic poetics some aspect of reality is reconstituted by the poet through plot structures which are unified representations of human action. Readers are affected as they analyse or

decompose the work into its component parts. The rules, educated insights and intelligent analysis involved in the system of Aristotle were devalued in the romantics' emphasis on aesthetic experience and the unconscious creativity of the artist. In the text-intrinsic approach of Formalism and New Criticism, both the imitated world and poetic creativity were at best secondary. With existentialism there was a return to reality--the reality of the human condition as understood by the ideology of existentialism. Modes of being and acting were not seen as determined by human nature but as possibilities for human choice, on the basis of which the human projects himself or herself.

### 1.2.2. Structuralist Insights

French Structuralism's desire to formulate a «morphology», or «grammar», of narrative and to establish rules that govern all forms of narrative is best understood as a reaction to existentialism's emphasis on human choice. For structuralists the surface or superficial level of narrative was important only as a means of descending to the more fundamental or deep level where history and human choice play no part. Such an approach does not do justice to history and to the particulars of narrative, but it does provide a perspective from which to view the particulars. The multiplicity of actors and actions in the narrative may be reduced to a limited number of «character types» or spheres of action and a limited number of types of action or «functions.»

Narrative may be seen as resting on profound ahistorical and general binary oppositions which are expressed in less profound and specific historical and cultural terms in the actual narrative. These oppositions must be mediated by a third category that is related to both realms in the actual narrative but which belongs to neither. Events which occur at different places in the actual narrative, then, are not seen primarily in relation to the development of the plot but in relation to each other. These events have a «paradigmatic» relationship with each other and as a bundle show the sort of solution or mediation which is taking place in the telling of the narrative. Hebrews speaks of Jesus the Son as reflecting the glory of God (1:1) and sharing the same flesh-and-blood nature of the children of God (2:14). Is it not possible to read the Gospels (at one level, at any rate) as portraying in narrative form this mediation presented in Hebrews in a didactic form?

Structuralist insights may help readers move beyond the view of the narrative as a one-dimensional story of events in the life of Jesus culminating with the crucifixion and resurrection. At a certain level each of the episodes is referring beyond itself to a more central reality. The different episodes are then seen not only as a way of moving the story forward but also in relation to a theme which is illuminated by each of the episodes.

The structuralists' concern with typologies led them to discern different types of narratives, and this insight is also applicable to Gospel study. Simple narratives tell of a change of a situation (from failure to success); complex narratives relate a simple change as it is embedded within or accompanied by another sort of action--like planning and learning. In ideological narratives the different actions in the narrative are explained by a commitment, an idea or an abstract rule. There are also narratives in which the importance is the perception which readers have of the event which is narrated.

### 1.2.3. Poststructural Insights

Poststructuralism grows out of structuralism and uses ideas implicit in structuralism to challenge the ideology of structuralism itself. Poststructuralism recognizes the existence of codes and the value of narrative structure, grammar and logic, but it disavows the assumption that there is an ahistorical structure determining the narrative on the surface level. Disavowed also, however, is the possibility of any final synthesis of meaning. For poststructuralists the structure of the text is such that it involves the reader in a process of analysis without a *final* synthesis or end. The text is like a group of threads braided together to form a core. Some of the threads move the story along in a linear temporal pattern but narratives should not be reduced to such elements. Other threads are permutable and allow for multivalence and reversibility.

The Christian who wishes to benefit from poststructural insights must be able to accommodate a poststructural *strategy* and a firm commitment to a world which ultimately has meaning in terms of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. A poststructuralist ideology is not Christian faith.

## 1.3. Deconstruction

### **1.3.1. Deconstruction and Poststructuralism.**

The term *Reconstruction* results from the project of showing how the structural goal of accounting for the form and meaning of literary works is subverted by the way the texts actually work. In practice Reconstruction depends on the appearance of a system of relationships which is then Reconstructed by the appearance of another system of relationships which can be considered more natural with regard to the system being undone. This more natural system of relationships is substituted for the one Reconstructed, but it too may be Reconstructed.

### **1.3.2. Deconstruction in Gospel Study**

The insights of Reconstruction may enable us to understand and appreciate the succession of approaches in biblical studies; from dogmatic, to historical, to existential and literary approaches. We may even appreciate different levels of meaning in the early church. With the literal meaning, the things spoken about in the text were related to the real world (Gospel narratives were seen as recounting what in fact happened). Typological and allegorical meanings were gained by correlating the persons, actions and events in the Gospels with persons, actions and events in the O T and/or to the history of the church. Tropological meanings moved beyond these perspectives and sought the moral truth signified by a passage. By directing the reference of the passage to final things, yet another (anagogic) meaning was discerned.

A type of Reconstruction results from the observation of the coexistence of different meanings and systems. Deconstruction may help contemporary readers/critics explain the coexistence in the Gospel of Mark of two portraits of Jesus--the divine Son of God who reveals his power and wisdom in Galilee and the Son of man whose passion is manifested in Jerusalem. No one portrait is able to exhaust the material of the text, and to subordinate one to the other causes a loss in both literary and religious terms

### **1.4. Reader-Response Criticism**

Reader-response criticism views literature in terms of readers and their values, attitudes and responses. The nature and role of the reader varies in the different forms of reader-response criticism, but in all forms there is a movement away from the view of interpretation as the determination by an autonomous reader of *the* meaning of an autonomous text. In one form (reader reception criticism) an attempt is made to situate a literary work within the cultural context of its production and then explore the shifting relations between this context and the changing contexts of historical readers. Another form (aesthetic-response criticism) emphasizes the process by which a reader actualizes a text. A text is marked by gaps which the reader must complete and blanks which the reader must fill in. Psychological approaches to the reader emphasize the stages of development of individual readers or the role played by the «psychological set» of readers.

The community influences the attention given by the reader and the kind of «actualization» made by the reader. To some extent, then, criticism involves the determination of the perspective from which reading will proceed and becomes a matter of persuasion as well as a matter of demonstration. Interest in and appreciation of «interpretative communities» in literary study may provide appreciation for and insight into the way different religious communities read the Gospels. Evangelicals as well as Roman Catholics are inevitably constrained by histories of interpretation, traditions and contemporary communities of faith. Meaning must always have some locale.

## **2. Developments in Gospel Study from a Literary Perspective**

The philosophical and religious context of the early church constrained the reading of the Gospels. Nevertheless, conventions of reading in the early church allowed attention to the literal level, levels beyond the literal and the life of readers (individuals and groups). With the critical approaches warranted by the world of the Enlightenment, the reference was taken to be history, at first the history recounted in the text (to be discounted or supported by critical study) and later the historical context of the formation of the tradition or of the final composition of the Gospels. With literary approaches in the 1960s there was a return to a variety of concerns comparable to the concerns of the early church.

### **2.1. Developments before Modern Literary Approaches**

### 2.1.1. Precritical Reading of the Gospels

In the reading of the Gospels in the precritical period, no distinction was made between the world depicted and the real historical world. Indeed, the Bible as a whole was seen as referring to the whole of historical reality. Past history of the Bible and the early church was involved as early biblical stories referred directly to specific temporal events and indirectly (as figures or types) to later stories and events. But the biblical world extended to the present, to the world of the reader of any age. Readers saw their own actions and feelings and the events of their world as figures of the biblical world and so were able to fit themselves into the biblical world.

The power of a precritical realistic reading extending from the OT to the readers' day depended in part on the fact that the world depicted in the Bible and the real historical world were not the ultimate reality. OT individuals and events were types of NT individuals and events, but the deepest meaning is not the historical in any sense. The Passover lamb may be a type which is made clear in the sacrifice of Christ. But both of these refer to a heavenly sacrifice for the sins of every conceivable form of being.

### 2.1.2. Post-Enlightenment Reading of the Gospels

With the Enlightenment the historicity of literary and other cultural phenomena replaced the framework of the theological conceptualization of the ancient and medieval world. The realistic feature of biblical narrative was related consciously to historical reference. The role of the biblical stories was to enable readers to uncover the historical sequence of events to which they referred. Undermined was the correlation between the world of the reader and the biblical world made possible when both were seen as expressions of the pre-existing divine world. This diminished the potentiality of the narratives to allow readers to make sense of themselves in relation to the world of the narrative in a somewhat direction fashion.

### 2.1.3. Subordination of Literary Qualities

When literary qualities of the Gospels were noted and commented on, they were subordinated to dogmatic or historical interests, and they were not appreciated because they were not within the truth of contemporary thinking. In the period of the ancient and medieval church, Augustine noted the literary qualities of the Fourth Gospel (in comparison with the Synoptics). The divine nature of the Lord was set forth by the writer «in such a way as he believed to be adequate to men's needs and notions» (*De cons.* 1.4.7). Augustine, of course, sees no tension between the dogmatic nature of the Gospel of John, the author's creative formulation of materials and the facticity of the story. The writer of the Gospel «is like one who has drunk in the secret of His divinity more **richly and** somehow more familiarly than others, as if he drew it from the very bosom of his Lord on which it was his wont to recline when He sat at meat» (*De cons.* 1.4.7).

## 2.2. Development of Literary Insights and Approaches

### 2.2.1. Early Beginnings

Concern with genuine literary matters began to surface in the 1960s and 1970s and became commonplace in the 1980s. The literary turn was prepared for in the attempt of R. Bultmann and the New Hermeneutic to prolong the text hermeneutically by attention to its linguistic dimensions. Preoccupation with existential categories and the lack of interaction with genuine literary criticism hindered the task.

In his 1964 publication, *The Language of the Gospel*, A. Wilder advocated a move which takes advantage of literary insights. He expounds the NT as «language event» in terms of literary form with the conviction that «behind the particular New Testament forms lies a particular life-experience and a language-shaping faith.» Wilder explicitly criticizes Bultmann's restriction of meaning to existential concepts. The view that the NT «tells us about ourselves, not about Things' and the way they are and the way they happen,» according to Wilder, results in a disparagement of «the whole story of man and salvation as the Bible presents it» (Wilder, 133). The literary criticism appropriate for NT study is not one

which remains confined to forms and conventions. There is reference in the text, but the reference is not the same as that in conventional study of the Gospels. Students of the NT can learn about its literary language and reference from students of poetry: «this kind of report of reality--as in a work of art--is more subtle and complex and concrete than in the case of a discursive statement, and therefore more adequate to the matter in hand and to things of importance» (Wilder, 133).

At this point it should be re-emphasized that for the Christian, literary approaches to the Gospels must exist in relation to historical approaches and especially to the historical reality of Jesus the Christ. Concentration on the literary alone would eventually lead to the same sort of protest made by disciples of Bultmann. They refused to be left with only a mythological Lord. We cannot be satisfied with only a literary Jesus. It should be noted, however, that the historical methods devised by scholars will never reveal the fullness of the meaning and significance of Jesus the Christ. Literary approaches may assist in that task.

### **2.2.2. Structuralist Contributions**

Wilder's work predates French Structuralism's attempt to move beneath the surface structure of a text with its historically constrained relationships to «deeper» ahistorical relationships. The structuralist turn provided impetus toward new ways of studying the relationships within the text. The structuralist interlude benefited the literary study of the Gospels, even though severely structuralist ideologies and models were not satisfying.

### **2.2.3. Redaction Criticism and Literary Criticism**

The parables of Jesus were favorite texts for existential and structuralist exegesis, but literary study after structuralism moved beyond study of parables and other units to the literary study of the Gospels as wholes. When the Gospels were seen as forms to be correlated with their unique historical and sociological settings, redaction criticism was born. But redaction criticism is not literary criticism. Redaction criticism seeks objectively to find *the* one correct theme, structure and historical setting. In literary study the historical setting of a text is seen as the originating circumstance and does not constitute a primary focus of study. The intention of the author to communicate certain christological, eschatological and other ideas is also relativized as literary criticism allows a variety of functions of texts and gives attention to the intention of readers (past and present).

The coordination of redactional-critical and literary-critical approaches is helpful, especially in order to guard against the ahistorical tendencies of some sorts of literary approaches. S. McKnight suggests that «a sharper profile will be obtained as one examines literary strategies in the light of the tradition-critical process, for one will be observing what the author is doing to the traditions (composition criticism)» (S. McKnight, 137).

## **3. The Gospels and Literary Conventions and Strategies**

The development of literary approaches to the Gospels has forced attention to the role and function of the Gospels and resulted in the recognition that the Gospels serve a variety of functions. The perception of the role and function of the Gospels influences the perception of genre and the strategies which are followed in reading and interpretation.

### **3.1. The Role and Function of the Gospels As Literature**

A literary approach to the Gospels is not designed to reduce the Gospel text to dogma and history, but neither is it designed to reduce the text to a nexus of linguistic and literary data. What references and/or functions of Gospel texts are conceivable and satisfying in literary study? (Non-literary references and functions are not ruled out, of course.) Is there a function of Gospel texts comparable to the function of literary texts--a function which is faithful to the nature of the Gospels and which remains in a dialectical relationship to dogmatic and historical references? The Gospels may be viewed in terms of the discovery and creation of a world which sustains intellectual, spiritual and emotional vitality, a world which is a divine gift and not simply the consequence of human quest and achievement. When the reference of the text is seen as a world of grace and truth, narrow dogmatic and historical references are relativized, no longer seen as the primary goal of study. This world-creating or world-revealing function of the Gospels is

comparable to the way that an and poetry function in enabling readers to create worlds, to come to know who they are and where they come from and are going, and to understand better their place in life and relation to nature and their fellows.

### **3.2. The Question of Genre**

The question of genre cannot be avoided, for every reader reads a text in the light of its presumed purpose and nature as a representation of reality and/or a work of an, and in light of the conventions of that particular sort of writing. The question of the genre of the Gospels is intriguing as a historical question, and a particular Gospel may be compared formally and historically with the other canonical Gospels, noncanonical Gospels, ancient biographies and other narratives. When genre is approached as the question of how to read, the historical-critical question is transcended. Whatever hypothesis is accepted as the beginning point for reading must be tested and made precise in the process of reading, for the Gospel text will withstand attempts to reduce its potential to any a priori judgment. Every Gospel creates its own conventions of reading while it maintains relationships with other forms of ancient and modern narrative. Readers must respond to the demands of genre, but they must also actualize the genre in the process of reading. That is, in the act of reading the Gospels the determination is made as to how the Gospels are to be read.

### **3.3. Form and Structure**

Form is sometimes used as equivalent to genre, but it is most often used to describe a work's principle of organization. Attention has been given primarily to mechanic form, the shape which is imposed externally, much as a mold imposes a shape on wet clay. (Organic form, on the contrary, is concerned with the shape which develops from within, like a growing plant.) At times the principle of organization is seen in terms of chronology. Each of the Gospels contains a passion narrative preceded by accounts of Jesus' words and deeds. In Mark and Matthew a distinction is made between an early ministry in Galilee and a later mission and passion in Jerusalem. Luke makes this distinction, but in addition has a lengthy travel narrative connecting the two phases.

At times the different sorts of content have been the basis of structuring. Matthew has narrative and discourse material alternating in such a way that five books can be discerned, each consisting of a section of narrative and a section of discourse. This pentateuchal structuring is supported similarity of the conclusions of each of the five sections of discourse, something like «And when Jesus finished these sayings. . .» (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1). But a threefold structure is seen when 4:17 and 16:21 are taken as dividing marks. Each of these verses contains the words «from then Jesus began» with an infinitive and a summary of the content to follow. Other structures are dependent on readers observing relationships between earlier and later sections.

The threefold chronological pattern of Luke has been modified by attention to references to Jerusalem which appear at turns in the story. The conclusion of an initial section (1:5--3:38) indicates that Jerusalem is the site of Jesus' final temptation. A second section (4:1--9:50) concludes with Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem. The travel narrative as a whole is movement toward Jerusalem and can be divided into 9:51-- 13:35 (the beginning of the journey) and 14:1--19:27 (the conclusion of the journey). The final section (19:28--24:53) tells of the reign of Jesus in Jerusalem by means of crucifixion and resurrection.

Mark can be perceived as a story of Jesus' ministry in and around Galilee followed by a journey to Jerusalem and Jesus' activities there. But it can be read as a passion narrative, prefaced by a series of controversies which lead up to the passion. It can also be read as three successive and progressively worsening stages in the story of the relations between Jesus and his disciples (1:16--8:26; 8:27--14:9; and 14:10-- 16:8).

The Gospel of John can be divided mechanically into Prolog, book of signs and book of passion. When weight is given to organic form, the Fourth Gospel may be compared with a musical fugue, with a theme announced and developed to a point, after which other themes are introduced and interwoven with the earlier themes. The themes which appear are introduced in the Prolog.

### **3.4. Plot**

Plot or narrative unity of the Gospels is related to but is not the same as form and structure. In some measure, the concept of «story» mediates form and plot, for story normally refers to the synopsis of the temporal order of events in a narrative. In summarizing a work we say that something happened, then something else, then something else and so on. Plot goes beyond the chronological ordering and accounts for the relationships between the events and the organization of the events for the particular effect created. Luke-Acts provides directions for ordering the Gospel which are easily seen when a literary perspective is assumed. Readers are invited to read the Gospel in light of the perspective of Acts. Prologs tie the two works together, as do events in Acts which parallel those in the Gospel. Jerusalem is central in both works, with the Gospel moving toward Jerusalem and the book of Acts moving away from Jerusalem. There is a clear correlation between events predicted by characters in the Gospel and their fulfillment in Acts. Readers are prepared for this correlation between Luke and Acts by correlation within each of the writings. Jesus' declaration that a prophet is not acceptable in his own country is followed immediately by his own townspeople's rejection (Lk 4:16-30), and Agabus' prediction of Paul's suffering (Acts 21:10-14) comes true immediately (Acts 21:30-35). Just as Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 guides the reader for the reading of the book of Acts, the prophecy of Simeon in Luke 2:34 prepares the reader for understanding the Gospel as the story of the prophet Jesus who created a division among the people in his ministry.

The beginnings and endings of the Gospels are important from a literary perspective. The Prolog of the Gospel of John prepares the reader for the entire Gospel. The infancy stories of Matthew and Luke serve the same function for those Gospels. Mark is unique in that it lacks a full-blown Prolog, contains a problematic ending and does not establish a clear and unambiguous set of connections among and between the episodes. The critical and imaginative competence and skill of readers are stretched in discerning the plot of Mark.

### **3.5. Character**

Characters are necessary for the actions which move the story along, but actions help define characters, so there is a dialectical relationship between plot and character in the Gospels. In the Gospels characters are portrayed--their moral, emotional and volitional qualities are expressed--in what they say and do as well as in what is said of them. Of primary interest in literary study is the way that convincing portraits of God and figures around Jesus are fashioned within the totality of the Gospel and how those portrayed persons are related to the rest of the story.

The Gospels differ widely in the way they utilize literary means to present portraits of Jesus (and other characterizations follow from the presentation of Jesus). John and Mark are at opposite poles. The Gospel of John utilizes a Prolog, lengthy discourses of Jesus and a prayer to his Father, a series of signs, testimony of independent witnesses and explicit statements of the narrator to present an unambiguous picture of the messiahship and divine sonship of Jesus. In Mark there is no Prolog, but the opening says that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Yet what seems to be so obvious at the beginning becomes problematic. Jesus is not Messiah in the traditional sense. What is revealed in the literary strategies is as confusing for the reader as Jesus' disclosure is to the disciples within the story.

God is a character in a literary sense in the Gospels. In the Gospel of John, God is characterized by Jesus. He is the one who sent Jesus. In Luke there is a process of Reconstruction at work in the tension between revolutionary and conservative aspects of Luke's God. The purpose of God is universal salvation, and the story of Luke-Acts is a «dialogue between God and a recalcitrant humanity» (Tannehill) with God overruling as well as ruling. But Luke-Acts proclaims God's faithfulness to Israel. The revolutionary and conservative aspects of the characterization of God creates a tension which is not clearly resolved in the story.

### **3.6. Narrative World and Rhetoric**

The narrative worlds of the Gospels are important. The world may be considered a «poetic» (not a «fictional») world in that the writers craft a unified sequence and introduce characters and tell the readers (directly and indirectly) how those characters are to be considered and so on. But in a real sense, the world (or the values of the world) is profoundly true for the authors. So true that the Gospels are attempts to lead readers to affirm or reaffirm belief in such a world. The Gospels may then be called narrative rhetoric, and a literary approach will give attention to the means utilized in the Gospels to appeal to the reader.

### 3.7. Authors and Narrators

Literary criticism of the Gospels is concerned with authorship in quite a different fashion than is historical criticism. What sort of author is it who is leading readers to affirm belief? What can be discovered from the work itself? This *author* is called the «implied author» in literary criticism and is to be distinguished from the real author who can be given a name and address.

The *narrator* is also a literary figure. Literary criticism distinguishes between first- and third-person narrators and (with third-person narrators) between the omniscient and limited point of view. The omniscient narrator may be intrusive or unintrusive. The narrators of the Gospels are third person, omniscient and intrusive. Gospel narrators know what needs to be known about persons and events, even having access to the characters' feelings, motives and thoughts. The narrators not only tell the story, they introduce the story, provide explanations, translate terms, tell us what is known or not known by characters and express judgments directly and indirectly. Readers are influenced by the nature of the narrator. There is a correlation between the dependability of the narrator and the more ultimate trustworthiness and trust which are being manifested and elicited.

In conclusion, literary approaches to the Gospels complement conventional approaches. They may enable readers to rediscover value and meaning in the Gospels which have become problematic with approaches which distance texts for purposes of critical examination. The assumptions and strategies of literary criticism allow readers to interact with texts in critical and creative modes and fashions.

#### Bibliography

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Literary criticism, the reasoned consideration of literary works and issues. It applies, as a term, to any argumentation about literature, whether or not specific works are analyzed. Plato's cautions against the risky consequences of poetic inspiration in general in his Republic are thus often. Literary criticism (or literary studies) is the study, evaluation, and interpretation of literature. Modern literary criticism is often influenced by literary theory, which is the philosophical discussion of literature's goals and methods. Though the two activities are closely related, literary critics are not always, and have not always been, theorists. Whether or not literary criticism should be considered a separate field of inquiry from literary theory, or conversely from book reviewing Literary Criticism. By reading and discussing literature, we expand our imagination, our sense of what is possible, and our ability to empathize with others. Improve your ability to read critically and interpret texts while gaining appreciation for different literary genres and theories of interpretation. Read samples of literary interpretation. Write a critique of a literary work. Texts that interpret literary works are usually persuasive texts. Literary criticism is a profession that provides additional context to a single work or a body of work. The best critics have a nearly encyclopedic grasp of at least one genre, if not multiple genres, and are able to paint the background around a given work. The goal is to enrich the experience of reading the work. Please note that literary criticism is not essential to appreciating a given work. Literature is food for our souls, and our souls are infinite, so the more perspectives we can have on a given work, the better the experience. Literary criticism (or literary studies) is the study, evaluation, and interpretation of literature. Modern literary criticism is often influenced by literary theory, which is the philosophical discussion of literature's goals and methods. Literary criticism was also employed in other forms of medieval Arabic literature and Arabic poetry from the 9th century, notably by Al-Jahiz in his *al-Bayan wa-l-tabyin* and *al-Hayawan*, and by Abdullah ibn al-Mu'tazz in his *Kitab al-Badi*.<sup>[3]</sup> Renaissance criticism[edit].