

# Core Principles of Practical Criticism

## (1) Close Reading

Practical Criticism emphasizes **close reading**—careful analysis of diction, imagery, tone, rhythm, structure, and figurative language. The critic must examine how meaning is created through words rather than relying on background information.

## (2) Four Kinds of Meaning

Richards proposed that language operates on four levels of meaning:

1. **Sense** – The literal meaning of the words.
2. **Feeling** – The emotional attitude conveyed.
3. **Tone** – The speaker's attitude toward the reader.
4. **Intention** – The purpose of the speaker.

A successful interpretation requires attention to all four aspects.

## (3) The Psychological Approach

Richards viewed literature as a means of organizing human impulses and emotions. A good poem balances conflicting feelings and produces psychological harmony. Literature, therefore, has value because it refines our sensibility.

## (4) Stock Responses and Misreadings

Richards warned against:

- **Stock responses** (conventional emotional reactions),
- **Sentimentality**,
- **Doctrinal readings** (imposing moral or political ideas),
- **Irrelevant associations**.

The critic must resist personal prejudice and focus strictly on textual evidence.

# Practical Criticism Applied to Poetry

To illustrate Practical Criticism, let us analyze a short poem through close reading.

**Example of Poetry: The Solitary Reaper by William Wordsworth**

The poem describes a Highland girl reaping grain and singing alone in a field. Richards' method would avoid discussing Wordsworth's biography or Romanticism initially. Instead, it would focus on:

**(a) Sense**

The literal situation: a solitary girl singing while working. The speaker listens and is deeply moved.

**(b) Feeling**

The emotional tone is one of admiration and melancholy beauty. Words like "melancholy strain" suggest sadness, yet the experience is enriching.

**(c) Tone**

The speaker's tone toward the reader is contemplative and reflective. He invites us to share his wonder.

**(d) Intention**

The poem aims to show how simple, rustic experience can produce profound emotional impact.

A practical critic would analyze imagery (nightingale, cuckoo), sound patterns, and rhythm. The repetition of soft vowel sounds enhances musicality. The poem's structure moves from description to reflection, emphasizing memory—the song remains in the speaker's heart long after it is heard.

Thus, meaning emerges from textual elements, not from external commentary.

## **Practical Criticism Applied to Prose**

Although often associated with poetry, Practical Criticism can also be applied to prose.

### **Example of Prose: Of Studies by Francis Bacon**

In this essay, Bacon discusses the value of reading, writing, and study.

**(a) Sense**

Bacon argues that studies serve "for delight, for ornament, and for ability."

**(b) Feeling**

The tone is authoritative and aphoristic. The emotional coloring is restrained, intellectual, and practical.

### **(c) Tone**

Bacon addresses the reader as a rational thinker. His compact sentences convey authority.

### **(d) Intention**

The essay intends to provide guidance on the proper use of knowledge.

A practical critic would analyze Bacon's use of parallel structure ("Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man"). The rhythmic balance strengthens persuasion. The essay's brevity and epigrammatic style reinforce its practical wisdom.

Rather than discussing Bacon's political career or Renaissance context, the critic focuses on how language produces clarity and force.

## **Significance of Practical Criticism**

Practical Criticism laid the foundation for later movements such as **New Criticism**. Critics like Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom developed similar close-reading techniques.

Richards' contribution includes:

- Shifting emphasis from author to text,
- Encouraging analytical precision,
- Introducing psychological awareness,
- Professionalizing literary studies.

## **Limitations**

Despite its strengths, Practical Criticism has limitations:

1. It may ignore historical and cultural context.
2. It underestimates the importance of authorial intention.
3. It assumes that objective interpretation is always possible.

Later critics argued that meaning is shaped by context, ideology, and reader response.

## **Conclusion**

Practical Criticism, as developed by I. A. Richards, is a method of close textual analysis that seeks to understand how meaning is constructed through language. By focusing on sense, feeling, tone, and intention, it trains readers to approach literature with discipline and sensitivity.

Through examples like *The Solitary Reaper* and *Of Studies*, we see how both poetry and prose can be examined without reliance on external information. Practical Criticism remains a foundational method in modern literary studies, emphasizing the autonomy of the text and the responsibility of the reader.

In essence, Richards transformed literary criticism into a more systematic and analytical discipline, encouraging readers not merely to admire literature but to understand how it works.