

## Exploring the Meaning of Critical Reading

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### Abstract

Critical Reading is an important activity of readers which opens the wide world of knowledge to them. This paper addresses the exact meaning of critical reading which is a collaboration between the reader and the writer. Critical reading refers to a higher level of reading that provides the multifaceted meaning of a particular text. A reader who reads critically can find the real taste of a text, which is the main purpose of any kind of reading.

**Keywords:** critical reading, collaboration between the reader and the writer, multifaceted meaning, original intent of the text.

### Introduction

Critical reading is a powerful process to analyze and evaluate what we are reading. It is not merely a general activity of reading a text, rather the term ‘Critical Reading’ refers to something more than that. Before going to scholarly definitions of critical reading, at first, we will reveal our personal understanding of it, so that later on our view may be judged by those standards.

For us critical reading is like an x-ray photo of any part of body. Apparent look is not enough to have a close knowledge of a part of body as well as a text. To know any of it more profoundly there should be a special process we need to go through. To know an organ of a body, x-ray machine helps to show the things exist inside the skin, the bones. Critical reading is like that medium which take the readers to those things of a text which are hidden between the lines.

The structure of a human body as well as the structure of a text determines the shape of that particular thing. And this structure of a text has been searched out by the process of critical reading. But there is a difference between the ways how the x-ray machine works and so does critical reading. X-ray machine brings out the actual things inside a human body which are not visible in bare eyes. This picture will not vary though observed through any other x-ray machine.

But the results of critical reading by several readers may not or must not be the same. The meanings found by different critical readers would be different. In this point my view of critical reading clashes with the original meaning of it.

### **Definition of Critical Reading by Catherine Wallace**

In this presentation, we have chosen a scholarly definition given by Catherine Wallace (2003). She says-

“Critical reading means taking a stance which by definition, involves closer than customary attention to text, a heightened consciousness- the reverse of automaticity in short” (p. 30).

This definition attracted our concentration, and we think it covers the whole area of the functions of critical reading. For making it clearer we have brought out three key words from this definition to start the discussion of the meaning of critical reading. Those are-

1. Customary attention
2. Heightened consciousness
3. Reverse of automaticity

Wallace says critical reading requires something more attention to the text than usual attention. The relationship between the reader and the text should be intimate. The reader has to pay heed to the text to dig out the real meaning of that particular text.

She also talks about heightened consciousness. Anything we do it requires a level of consciousness. The level may be low, medium, or high. Critical reading needs readers heightened consciousness to the text, so that no important key point could be overlooked. If readers' level of consciousness is high only then, in depth observation of a text is possible.

There is another important condition, which is the reverse of automaticity. We consider them 'conditions' because the combination of these features is what we call critical reading. General reading is most of the time the result of automatic response of the mind. It means,

without occupying the mind we can read in this state. But even while it is critical reading, the repetition of this automatic process happens. To understand the meaning of the text, a critical reader reread the text without going for the unnecessary details, rather find out the main key words. This is the reverse of automaticity.

There is one other important skill called critical thinking, which determines the way of critical reading. Critical reading and critical thinking are interrelated. Critical thinking evaluates the ideas of a text; it decides what idea should be accepted and which should not. It somewhat reflects our schemata while judging any idea (Kurland, 2000). In other sense, critical reading depends on critical thinking.

### **The Difference between Critical and Noncritical Readers**

At this point of the discussion, one question may come to our mind: What is the difference between critical reader and noncritical reader? It is all about “Facts” and “Interpretation”. Noncritical reader looks for facts or the superficial meaning of the text (Kurland, 2000). On the contrary, critical reader would not be satisfied with the external meaning only; s/he always has something to add to the meaning, that is interpretation. This interpretation may not support the idea or meaning suggested by an author. This is the reflection of the ideology of the reader.

A critical reader interprets meaning with a critical eye, but a noncritical reader does not probe deep into the text. But to reach an interpretation critical readers have to know the difference between restatement, description, and interpretation. What a text conveys is called restatement, what a text does that is description and finally, what a text means that is called interpretation (Kurland, 2000).

### **The Strategies of Critical Reading**

The discussion about critical reading would be incomplete if we do not bring out the strategies or the processes of successful critical reading. They are-

- Previewing
- Annotating
- Summarizing
- Analyzing
- Re-reading
- Responding (Writing@CSU, n.d.).

Before reading any text, the first step of a critical reader should be previewing the text, to have an exterior idea of that particular text. The title and the structure are very important. The reader may get information about the author or at least about the purpose of his/her reading. Annotating is a very good practice of any kind of reader. To make notes about the main theme, key ideas, etc., work positively while reading a text. When the text is, read the immediate job for a critical reader is to evaluate his/her understanding by summarizing the whole text. Then gradually the reader is entering the world of much more active reading. S/he is now able to analyze the text. That means find out the electron and proton of the text.

Analyzing refers to examining the innermost elements which develop the structure of a text. There has been a discussion about the reverse of automaticity, which suggests re-reading. The most constructive and functional job of a critical reader is his/her response to the text. There must be certain things s/he wants to accept, and certain ideas do not agree with. Response and interpretation are at some point look like similar ideas.

### **Principles and Purposes of Critical Reading**

According to Catherine Wallace (2003), there are some principles and purposes of critical reading; those have been taken under consideration in this presentation. Critical reading does not give much emphasis on individual responses rather on communally negotiated responses (p. 42). There is a condition of being accepted by mass number of people because reading is a social process (Wallace, 2003).

Non-native speaker readers are not considered to be less strong than native speaker readers (p. 42). The success of critical reading depends on readers' schemata. Nonnative speaker readers could have more developed schemata than native speaker readers.

Author should not be considered the only negotiator of a text's meaning (p. 42). If does so there would be no meaning of interpretation.

The main purpose of critical reading is to receive or gain a profound understanding of the ideological meaning of a text (p. 43). It does not mean that the surface meaning is ignored here but the emphasis is given in the ideological meaning. The ideology of the reader influences critical reading.

By raising questions about the text critical readers move beyond the text and build a chain of argument around it (p. 43). Here the purpose of critical reading is fulfilled.

### **A Common Argument**

There is a common argument around the question: should we consider critical reading as reading in general sense? At the very last of this presentation, we would not argue with this argument: Because it is not an automatic process just like general reading, rather it requires extra care or consciousness. If we notice that how a bum works on headache, it would be easier to decide whether critical reading is reading or something different from the conventional idea of reading. A head bum does not work directly to heal the pain; it just creates another sense of feeling to divert our concentration from the sense of pain. Though it does not unswervingly work, it serves the purpose of healing. Similarly, Critical reading takes us to the inner world of the text from the peripheral look of it. It diverts our concentration to another aspect of meaning. General reading seeks out the surface meaning of the text when critical reading more consciously investigates all possible implications of the same text. That is how critical reading is a bit different from general reading.

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