

**THE PRINCIPLES OF  
CRITICISM; AN  
INTRODUCTION TO THE  
STUDY OF LITERATURE**

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The principles of criticism; an introduction to the study of literature by W. Basil Worsfold

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# THE PRINCIPLES OF CRITICISM

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY  
OF LITERATURE

BY

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## TO THE READER

*THE purpose of this book is to present an account of the main principles of literary criticism, and to illustrate these principles by passages from great writers.*

*The book will, therefore, be found to contain (in addition to the text) a collection of noteworthy critical utterances.*

*The translations from the Greek, German, and French have been done by the Author.*

*References are made (with two exceptions) to the text of Aristotle by the pages of Immanuel Bekker's large (Berlin) edition; and to that of Plato, by the pages of the edition of Henry Stephens. Addison is cited by numbers of the Spectator, and Lessing by chapters of the Laocoon. In the case of other authors, the footnotes will sufficiently indicate the sources of reference.*

*Both an index of authors and an index of subjects have been provided.*

W. B. W.

RIDGE, NEAR CAPEL, SURREY,  
November 1, 1902.

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# THE PRINCIPLES OF CRITICISM

## INTRODUCTORY

### I. ASPECTS OF LITERATURE

I SUPPOSE that it will not be denied that comparison lies at the root of all our judgments in art and literature, and that our judgments are valid in proportion as the range of experience on which they are based is of greater or less extent. It is the principle in which Burke finds a foundation for the belief in the existence of a general standard of taste. A man who has never seen a piece of sculpture admires the representations of the human head afforded by a barber's shop; but his admiration for the waxen effigies of the barber is killed by a visit to a studio. The ordinary processes which minister to mental growth and to the training of eye and ear—education, experience, travel, and opportunities of social converse—together provide material which, unconsciously applied, is sufficient to enable us to form approximately correct judgments on every-day questions. In this way we become sensible to the charm of painting and music, learn to distinguish between a harmonious and an inharmonious arrangement of form and colour, and are quickly affected by any sense of incongruity in our social or material surroundings.

For all the purposes of every-day life taste will serve.

But if we go round a picture gallery with an artist we soon find that while 'taste' makes the sight of these pictures a genuine enjoyment, it will go only a little way towards helping us to discriminate between the relative merits of the several works. Broadly speaking, we do not see much difference in them. But the artist, or the critic, sees both the excellences and defects to which our eyes are blind.

As with art, so with literature. We read this or that book because, as we say, it 'interests' us, or it 'amuses' us. Our taste leads us to prefer one book to another, or one branch of literature, or style of writing, to another; but it does not enable us to explain the grounds on which in each case our preferences are based. Some readers do not care to analyse their feelings. For them this book will have little or no interest. But there are others—and they form an increasingly large proportion of the entire mass of readers of books—who have passed beyond the stage of unconscious pleasure, and who wish not merely to *read* but to *study* books. For them this book may have an interest, because the study of any form of literature cannot be usefully undertaken without a certain basis of independent knowledge. Inasmuch as literature in its higher forms is an art, the student of literature must be also a critic of literature. As he proceeds in his reading and acquires experience, he will, consciously or unconsciously, assume this attitude. He will not be satisfied with saying, 'This pleases me'; but he will also ask, 'Why does it please me?' and 'Ought it to please me?' If these questions are to be answered, the reader must be able to take up a point of view outside the particular work upon which he is engaged.