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Online Literary Criticism: When Reader Becomes Critic

Abstract

Literary criticism as a part of mass media communication is going through significant changes with the development of online media. We can see many new variations of criticism today. Reviewers and critics are active on social sites; they use blogs, vlogs and podcasts to spread information about new literature. Additionally, internet and social media also give space to laypersons who can also share their opinions on everything, on literature too. People are online the most of their time and it means online shopping, online reading and also online evaluating. With a little hyperbole, we can say that anyone can be a critic today. In addition to blogs, vlogs and podcasts, there are also specialized websites for reading and evaluating new books. One of the most popular, Goodreads, will help us to look at new aspects of literary criticism. In this paper, we will try to compare professional critiques with laic criticism, both in the online environment, to point out how literary criticism is changing these days. Comparison based on content analysis will help us

to describe current variations of literary criticism.

Key words

Communication. Goodreads. Internet. Laypersons. Literature. Literary criticism. Mass-media. Professionals. Social media.

Introduction

Ernest Hemingway said: “Critics are men who watch a battle from a high place then come down and shoot the survivors”¹. Certainly, Hemingway was writing decades ago and the nature of criticism has changed since then. But a tense relationship between writers and critics is still quite common. The main question here is—what does this relationship look like in the era of the internet and social media? How far can critics go in an era, when anyone can be a critic? In this paper, I will focus on the changes of literary criticism as a communication and I will try to describe the main aspects of it mainly with the help of the website www.goodreads.com – a popular page for readers and fans of literature. I will also work with user reviews of one concrete book² from professional and established world media and with reviews from Goodreads. This information will be treated as the basis for my research. Its aim is to describe current literary criticism in the online world with a focus on the difference between professional and laic criticism.

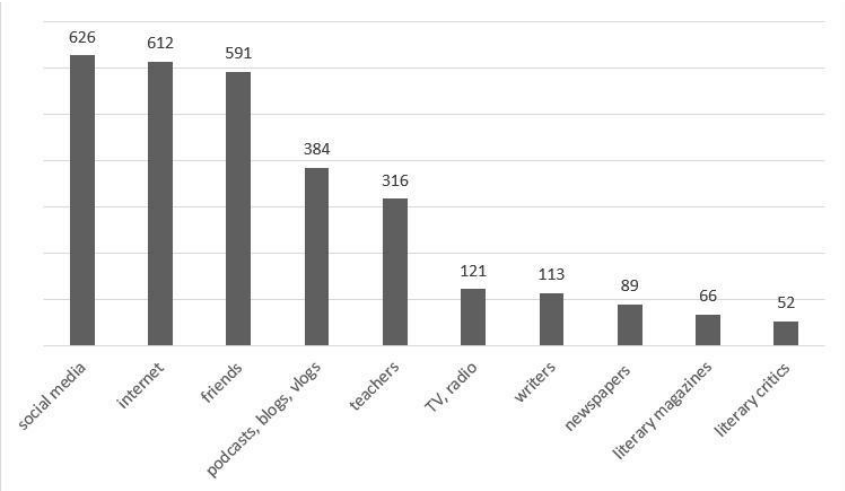


Figure 1: Answers to question “Where do you search for information about new books?”.

Source: own processing, 2021

1 Literary Criticism in Online Media World

Literary criticism can be defined as “a part of literary theory that provides contemporary interpretation, commenting, evaluation and appraisal of current literature pieces”³. It is an activity provided by literary critics and readers can find its outcomes usually in the mass media. “These days, literary criticism has a new look – it exists not only in addition to magazines, radio or television text made by literary critics, it also exists as comments on Facebook, Instagram’s feeds or stories, as blogs, vlogs, podcasts, but we can also find it in the form of short

annotations (PR-texts) – and all of these in various media”⁴. These new forms of literary criticism are becoming more and more popular. In my current research of literary criticism in the 21st century, I used the questionnaire⁵ method to find where people search for information about new books⁶. In Figure 1, we can see that internet and social media are the most common sources of this information. The ratio of traditional and new media is 276 : 1 622.

The tendency to evaluate literature on the internet is nothing new. With the development of online shopping, we can see a rise

1 Ernest Hemingway Quotes About Critics. [online]. [2021-01-19]. Available at: <https://www.azquotes.com/author/6539-Ernest_Hemingway/tag/critics>.

2 Sally Rooney’s Normal people. It was first published in 2018, in 2020 also in Slovak translation.

3 STANKOVÁ, M.: Literary criticism – from hero to zero? In KVETANOVÁ, Z., SOLÍK, M. (eds.): MEGATRENDS AND MEDIA. On the Edge. Trnava : Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, 2020, p. 622.

4 Ibid.

5 The questionnaire was completed by 985 university students, 84 % women and 16 % men in the age from 18 to 26 years.

6 The questionnaire Literárna kritika v 21. storočí [Literary criticism in 21st century] is available at <<https://www.surveio.com/survey/d/R5F8HoM-3M4T2N7W9Z>>.

in the inclination to read other people’s reviews when it comes to deciding which book to buy (and then to read). This works similarly with electronic devices, for example, because in some contexts we cannot forget that today, it is normal to treat book like goods. It also influences literary criticism, for example in the extension of the semantics of the word “review”⁷. Review as a journalistic genre can be defined as “a short notice or discussion or critical article in a paper, journal or periodical”⁸. On the other hand, there is tendency to widen the semantics of it to the meaning of customer reviews. Czech literary scientist Jiří Trávniček mentioned that Amazon, for example, was at its beginning a source of information about new books and people could find there the opinions of other buyers, which influenced them more than the authoritative voice of literary criticism or the media⁹.

With the quick expansion of social media, we witnessed the changes in the evaluation of literature. Internet and social media firstly change the media language¹⁰.

Also literary-criticism texts are more open, more pragmatic and more emotional than the rational texts that we are used to in traditional media. Communication is quicker, has “no border” in the meaning of *netiquette*¹¹ and also orthography or stylistics. “The diffused network instead of the hierarchized institution. With almost no normative regulation (so far), with no professional editorial staff - thus, with no societal editorial responsibility. The online media is based on emotional-uncritical gossip. Hence, its media language is primarily figurative-expressive”¹². Reviews and essays are part of internet hypertext¹³ along with posts, feeds and tweets on one hand, and with blogs, vlogs and podcasts on the other hand. Finnish publicist, Jarkko Jokelainen, in his paper called *Anyone Can Be a Critic. Is There Still a Need for Professional Arts and Culture Journalism in the Digital Age?* considers this change positive: “Instead of accusing the internet we should be praising it. Never before has so much arts and culture journalism been accessible, and never before has there been so much discussion. The forum is open for everyone who is interested. Anyone can be a critic, and many will”¹⁴.

In this study, I will try to show the similarities and differences between laic literary criticism on Goodreads and professional critiques on online versions of chosen representatives of the traditional media.

2 Goodreads

An interesting example of online, laic and de-journalistic¹⁵ literary criticism is Goodreads. This website was launched in 2007 and it is a platform for readers and literature lovers who want to share their reading experiences and opinions on literature. In the “About Us” section of this website is written: “Goodreads is the world’s largest site for readers and book recommendations. Our mission is to help people find and share books they love”¹⁶. The aspect of sharing is very important in this case. Readers can compare their experiences with friends or other people on Goodreads, which can

Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper University of Oxford, 2013, p. 40.

15 De-journalism is a term by Anna Sámelová meaning “generally attended de-professionalism of journalism skills (text, sound and picture) in media on the base of the internet. It is a state of thing with practically unconditional accessibility to publish own amateur articles, audio-records, pictures or videos”.
SÁMELOVÁ, A.: *Moc a pravda v podmienkach Rozhlasu a televízie Slovenska*. Bratislava : Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2018, p. 27.; Remark by the author: Original version of definition: “designation of the generally present de-professionalization of journalistic crafts (textual, audio and visual) in Internet-based media. It is a state of practically unlimited availability of publishing your own amateur articles, audio recordings, photographs or videos.”
16 About Us. [online]. [2021-01-22]. Available at: <https://www.goodreads.com/about/us>.

7 This also showed results of the questionnaire: respondents tend to perceive “review” widely – from laic opinions and advice on the internet to critical reviews on the pages of magazines and newspapers.

8 CUDDON, J. A.: *Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 5th Edition. Chichester, West Sussex, UK : Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 605.

9 TRÁVNÍČEK, J.: Čtenáři a internauti. Obyvatelé České republiky a jejich vztah ke čtení (2010). Brno : Host, 2011, p. 29.

10 See: SÁMELOVÁ, A., STANKOVÁ, M.: Some Ideas on Facts and Non-Facts within the Media Language. In *European Journal of Media, Art and Photography*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 118-123.

11 In the meaning of Internet etiquette.

12 Ibid, p. 121.

13 In the meaning of text linked to other texts.

14 JOKELAINEN, J.: *Anyone Can Be a Critic. Is There Still a Need for Professional Arts and Culture Journalism in the Digital Age?* Oxford :

also lead to competition in some way¹⁷. This website also works with the current popular tendency to be (or act like) a “bookworm”. We can see this tendency mainly on social media, for example on *Instagram*, where people share their pictures with the hashtag #bookworm¹⁸. All this information leads us to one important thought-reading online is becoming social, readers act like a community. This fact stands in opposition to the traditional reception of literary criticism as a quite individual activity based on quiet reading and thinking about a book.

Goodreads plays also an important role for publishers and authors – books with high rankings and good reviews are more likely to be bought by publishers in other countries for translation. For publishers, it is an effective tool to see readers’ opinions and to predict popularity in their own countries’ book markets¹⁹.

3 Reviews in Online Versions of Traditional Media

In this study, I will focus on concrete reviews of Sally Rooney’s novel *Normal people*, which I will shortly describe and characterize as an example of professional literary critiques in the mass media. As representatives of the traditional media, three reviews were picked from the online version of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian*. These three media were chosen because of their strong tradition in literary criticism²⁰. The first of the three reviews published was a text in *The Guardian* by Kate Clanchy²¹ (September 1st, 2018) and followed in April 2019 by reviews from Lauren Sarazen²² in *The Washington Post* and Dwight Garner²³ in *The New York Times*. Before we look at the texts, we know these media are professional and important not only in the USA, but also in other parts of the world. We can also assume that the authors of the reviews are professional critics²⁴. So, without

looking at the texts, readers already know that they will get a professional opinion on the book from people with the theoretical and also practical knowledge needed in this field. Another important fact connected with the formal aspect of reviews is their length. On average, the reviews are approximately 6 350 characters long. The online platforms offer media a chance to make news and journalism more interactive – people usually can share, comment on and like online media articles. In the case of these three reviews, The Guardian’s review has the highest number of comments (88), *The Washington Post* 15 and the review in *The New York Times* has 6 comments.

The content of the reviews suggests aspects typical for reviews in the media. We can see authors use expressive and poetical language, also in evaluating the parts “She’s like one of those elite magicians who can make a playing card pierce the rind of a watermelon”²⁵. In the reviews, there are also important intertextual references, written as well in ironic ways “They’re as lonely as Frank Sinatra on some of his album covers, as lonely as Hank Williams’s whip-poor-will”²⁶, but mainly in the context of the literature (critics compare Sally Rooney to other writers). All three reviews evaluate

20 And, of course, with regard to the language aspect.

21 CLANCHY, K.: *Normal People by Sally Rooney review – a future classic*. Released on 1st September 2019. [online]. [2021-01-22]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/01/normal-people-sally-rooney-review>.

22 SARAZEN, L.: *Sally Rooney has been called the voice of her generation. Believe the hype*. Released on 16th April 2019. [online]. [2021-01-22]. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/at-28-sally-rooney-has-been-called-the-voice-of-her-generation-believe-the-hype/2019/04/16/7e1de312-6050-11e9-9ff2-abc984dc9eec_story.html>.

23 Ibid.

24 Kate Clanchy is a poet, writer and jour-

nalist, Lauren Sarazen is also a writer and reviewer with MA in literature and Dwight Garner is a book critic, which was editor for the Book Review.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

the book, use arguments to explain their opinions and consider the book as a part of literature. Critics use also terms from literary theory and try to characterize the book and also try to put it in the social context: “Rooney’s ability to dive deep into the minute details of her characters’ emotional lives while maintaining the cool detached exterior of the Instagram age reflects our current preoccupation with appearance over vulnerability. Here, youth, love and cowardice are unavoidably intertwined, distilled into a novel that demands to be read compulsively, in one sitting”²⁷; “She’s an original writer who, you sense, is just getting started”²⁸; “Normal People may not be about being young right now, but better than that, it shows what it is to be young and in love at any time. It may not be absolutely contemporary, but it is a future classic”²⁹. The authors of these texts may be more subjective in some parts, but these texts are firstly about Sally Rooney’s book, not about them.

4 Reviews on Goodreads

As of January 22nd 2021, we can find 468,200 ratings and 39,616 reviews³⁰ in more than 40 languages on this website.

After a brief look at some of these reviews it is easy to state a few things: authors are a lot more focused on their own reading experience, on their own feelings about the book and also they are very open and keen to express their opinions. This means that evaluations in these kinds of reviews mostly use words like “love”, “hate”, “like” and “don’t like” – the laic reviewers also often use phrases about terrible struggles during the reading. This is more important than arguments, description and helping other readers. The “emotional” aspect of these laic critics can be also highlighted by emoticons. All these tendencies can be seen in Figure 2.

This method of laic literary criticism is very interactive – other readers (and potential critics) can like and comment on reviews written by other users of this website. In the case of Goodreads, we are talking about thousands of likes and hundreds of comments on one review. Remember the few comments in the case of the three professional reviews mentioned above. This interactivity also brings

the question of *netiquette* - different opinions on the book you love or hate can lead to conflicts. A brief look at the comments on reviews about *Normal people* shows that users of Goodreads are well-behaved and they tend to comment on reviews close to their opinions. We can see lot of agreeing and thanks about honesty and courage in evaluations.

Also, we can see the tendency to be very critical – meaning giving a negative evaluation as an attempt not to be one of the masses, one of the mainstream that appreciate the book. It is connected also with the tendency not to agree with professional critics or opinions presented in the media: “Man booker prize long list nominee and Costa book awards nominee This is a book that has many admirers and sadly it didn’t work for me and while I would love to agree with all the judges on this one I only struggled to the end because it was a bookclub read”³¹. If we take, for example, the first page with 30 reviews, 12 of them are more positive and 18 rather negative.

There is also an obvious tendency to not use punctuation, the grammar is not important for many of reviewers. Another aspect of laic criticism is its length – most of them are shorter (sometimes, the review is just a few sentences long).

27 SARAZEN, L.: *Sally Rooney has been called the voice of her generation. Believe the hype.* Released on 16th April 2019. [online]. [2021-01-22]. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/at-28-sally-rooney-has-been-called-the-voice-of-her-generation-believe-the-hype/2019/04/16/7e1de312-6050-11e9-9ff2-abc984d-c9eec_story.html>.

28 GARDNER, D.: *Sally Rooney’s ‘Normal People’ Explores Intense Love Across Social Classes.* Released on 8th April 2019. [online]. [2021-01-22]. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/08/books/review-normal-people-sally-rooney.html>>.

29 CLANCHY, K.: *Normal People by Sally Rooney review – a future classic.* Released on 1st September 2019. [online]. [2021-01-22]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/01/normal-people-sally-rooney-review>>.

30 *Normal People by Sally Rooney.* [online]. [2021-01-22]. Available at: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/41057294-normal-people?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=QeH9TOtng9&rank=1>. For example in the amount of read-through books.

31 *Normal People by Sally Rooney.* [online]. [2021-01-22]. Available at: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/41057294-normal-people?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=QeH9TOtng9&rank=1>.

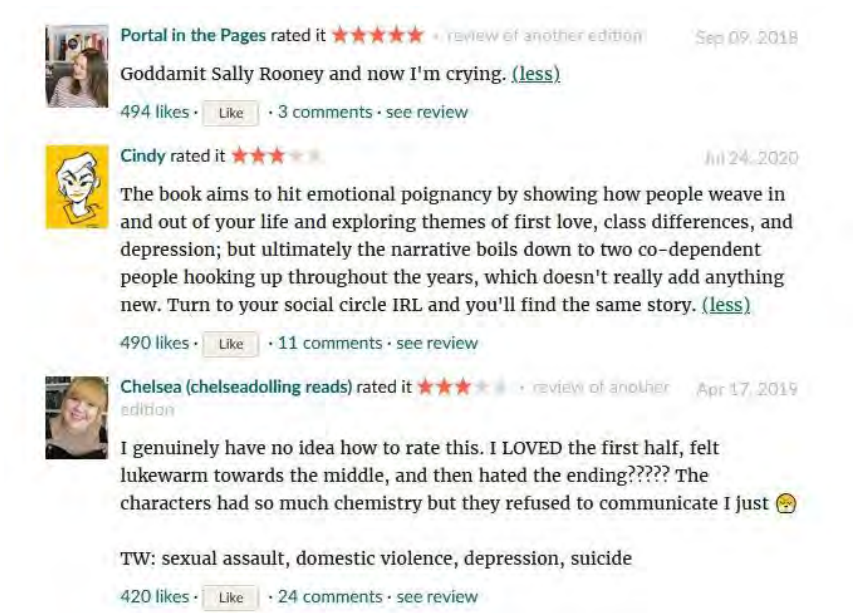


Figure 2: The example of laic reviews on Goodreads.

Source: *Normal People* by Sally Rooney. [online]. [2021-01-22]. Available at: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/41057294-normal-people?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=QeH9TOtng9&rank=1>.

Instead of Conclusion

The brief description of professional and laic texts of literary criticism shows the differences we already know from comparison of the “offline” and online media: traditional media and their critics evaluate books with arguments and facts based on reading experience and critic’s skills. On the other hand, laic critics on Goodreads work mainly with their emotions about the book. Numbers show that Goodreads has a big impact and also that readers share their opinions with other users of this website. We can see that in this case, the online version of traditional media is closer to “offline” media. What is slightly a surprise;

most of the reviewers on Goodreads are quite polite and express their opinions with an appropriate level of decency. This cannot be compared, for example, with the many reactions on the Slovak website *www.martinus.sk*, where people evaluate books, too. On *Martinus*, we can often see rudeness and negative feelings, not only in reaction to some of reviews, but also in reviews.

Another important fact, that the online media brings, is also a shift in journalistic genres. The review as a genre, today, becomes more open and semantically wider term. Also with the help of this “online evaluation of everything”, people these days consider as reviews those opinions, experiences

and advice about goods on the internet. At this point, we need to consider also the marketing aspect of literary-critical activities. As I mentioned earlier, publishers use Goodreads as a source of mass opinion, these websites can be useful indicators of popularity. However, publishers also need to be beware of the aspects mentioned above, mainly the emotional character of these reviews, because emotions are not always reliable. Another important thing, that also needs to be examined, is cultural differences. On the other hand, readers’ reviews can also show publishers what kind of audience is any specific book good for and therefore they can set up concrete marketing strategy, because information from websites such as Goodreads are also good sources of sociological facts.

Laic literary criticism always existed as some kind of supplement to professional criticism. Critics’ activities online can be considered as resuscitation for academic criticism, which can enlarge the audience for the reviews and their thinking about literature.

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