

# Critical Essay

## Definition of Critical Essay

Contrary to the literal name of “critical,” this type of [essay](#) is not only an interpretation, but also an evaluation of a literary piece. It is written for a specific [audience](#), who are academically mature enough to understand the points raised in such essays. A literary essay could revolve around major motifs, themes, [literary devices](#) and terms, directions, meanings, and above all – structure of a literary piece.

## Evolution of the Critical Essay

Critical essays in English started with Samuel Johnson. He kept the critical essays limited to his personal opinion, comprising praise, admiration, and censure of the merits and demerits of literary pieces discussed in them. It was, however, Matthew Arnold, who laid down the canons of literary critical essays. He claimed that critical essays should be interpretative, and that there should not be any bias or sympathy in criticism.

## Examples of Critical Essay in Literature

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**Example #1: *Jack and Gill: A Mock Criticism* (by Joseph Dennie)**

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“The personages being now seen, their situation is next to be discovered. Of this we are immediately informed in the subsequent line, when we are told,

Jack and Gill  
Went up a hill.

Here the [imagery](#) is distinct, yet the description concise. We instantly figure to ourselves the two persons traveling up an

ascent, which we may accommodate to our own ideas of declivity, barrenness, rockiness, sandiness, etc. all which, as they exercise the imagination, are beauties of a high order. The reader will pardon my presumption, if I here attempt to broach a new principle which no critic, with whom I am acquainted, has ever mentioned. It is this, that poetic beauties may be divided into negative and positive, the former consisting of mere absence of fault, the latter in the presence of excellence; the first of an inferior order, but requiring considerable critical acumen to discover them, the latter of a higher rank, but obvious to the meanest capacity.”

This is an excerpt from the critical essay of Joseph Dennie. It is an interpretative type of essay in which Dennie has interpreted the structure and content of Jack and Jill.

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**Example #2: *On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth* (by Thomas De Quincey)**

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“But to return from this [digression](#), my understanding could furnish no reason why the knocking at the gate in Macbeth should produce any effect, direct or reflected. In fact, my understanding said positively that it could not produce any effect. But I knew better; I felt that it did; and I waited and clung to the problem until further knowledge should enable me to solve it. At length, in 1812, Mr. Williams made his debut on the stage of Ratcliffe Highway, and executed those unparalleled murders which have procured for him such a brilliant and undying reputation. On which murders, by the way, I must observe, that in one respect they have had an ill effect, by making the connoisseur in murder very fastidious in his taste, and dissatisfied by anything that has been since done in that line.”

This is an excerpt from Thomas De Quincey about his criticism of Macbeth, a play by William Shakespeare. This essay sheds light on Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and their thinking. This is an interpretative type of essay.

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### Example #3: *A Sample Critical Essay on Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises* (by Richard Nordquist)

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“To keep Jake Barnes drunk, fed, clean, mobile, and distracted in *The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway employs a large retinue of minor functionaries: maids, cab drivers, bartenders, porters, tailors, bootblacks, barbers, policemen, and one village idiot. But of all the retainers seen working quietly in the background of the novel, the most familiar figure by far is the waiter. In cafés from Paris to Madrid, from one sunrise to the next, over two dozen waiters deliver drinks and relay messages to Barnes and his compatriots. As frequently in attendance and as indistinguishable from one another as they are, these various waiters seem to merge into a single emblematic figure as the novel progresses. A detached observer of human vanity, this figure does more than serve food and drink: he serves to illuminate the [character](#) of Jake Barnes.”

This is an excerpt from an essay written about Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. This paragraph mentions all the characters of the novel in an interpretative way. It also highlights the major [motif](#) of the essay.

### **Functions of a Critical Essay**

A critical essay intends to convey specific meanings of a literary text to specific audiences. These specific audiences are knowledgeable people. They not only learn the merits and demerits of the literary texts, but also learn different shades and nuances of meanings. The major function of a literary essay is to convince people to read a literary text for reasons described.