Approaching an “Unclosed Whole”\textsuperscript{1} through a Triadic Analysis of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

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Abstract

Any message encoded in a certain discourse on the common ground of reference, purpose or aim that a discourse serves, runs the risk of semantic gap at the crucial moment of decoding. The response(s) may contradict the feedback, or else the feedback may bring about epistemic violence and thereby may subvert the projected meaning(s). Teaching T.S. Eliot’s poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as a part of an undergraduate course at a University (in Bangladeshi context) led us to the discovery of a threefold analysis (phase by phase) of the poem: a. constituent analysis, b. structuralist reading, and c. dialogic criticism, which was quite challenging. This paper aims at analysing the stated poetic piece as a discourse and setting it against the backdrop of a literature classroom at the tertiary level with a view to understanding how the aforementioned three-phase-analysis of a text can help the learners go beyond the limit of identifying with the objective reading of a discourse, and thus they pave their way to the undiscovered world of signification and eventually can relate to a social context where the meaning is multiple and the voices are polyphonic.

The age-old tradition of the analysis (in the context of Bangladesh) of a literary piece, say poetry, maintains that a thematic analysis of the text in collaboration with a few stylistic features directed towards biographical and psychological sketches of the author ascertains a towering manifesto of literary criticism. But this well-worn notion needs to undergo a drastic change ever since the dawn of literary theory, amazingly enough, in the wake of the twentieth century has brought about almost an upheaval in the realm of literary criticism. There lies before us multiple tributaries opened up by the new perspectives driven by the newly propounded literary theories. At this juncture, a very typical question might be posed before our literary conscience, better yet, our teaching conscience: How much are we prepared to take in this new current, and to impart literary education among the freshmen
coming to the Universities? Cleanth Brooks, a celebrated formalist critic in his essay “The Language of Paradox” proposes that “there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry” (Rivkin and Ryan 58). No doubt, this rhetorical device usable either for a traumatic convulsion or simply for persuasion might be a vital factor in understanding poetry. The eventual question requires us to answer if our fresh undergraduate students are ready enough to retain such high-profile devices to their faculty or not. The paucity of traditional notion(s) a propos literary criticism hinted at the beginning cannot encourage us that much. We would rather concentrate upon our strategies not to let a semantic gap take over their (students’) faculty, and gradually sap them dry. The challenging force of teaching at the undergraduate level has provoked us to think over the possible solutions as to determine feasibly appropriate approaches to literary criticism. We have dared to select a text of higher order and ostensible complexity: T. S. Eliot’s earlier experiment on fragmentation resulting in the modernist poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. Through a triadic analysis, in which linguistic examination is set in relation to structural exploration interwoven with Bakhtinian dialogics, we have attempted phase by phase to erect for literary criticism for the freshmen in the Universities (in Bangladesh) such a model which may be of some potential use to them, at least at their initial level of higher studies.

We have found it worthwhile to concentrate on the constituent analysis in the first phase since a text, or a discourse, is an enlargement of language that maybe longer than merely a sentence. Sentences juxtaposed against one another pile up into a larger whole (a text, or a discourse). Thus the analysis of the text in its rudimentary stage-the intrasentential and the intersentential levels-is about how sentences hang together to form a text. We could suggest at this point a grammatical analysis or, at its best, a syntactic analysis, but we have not found it efficacious in view of the students’ (those admitted at the undergraduate level in Bangladeshi Universities) already having a basic sense of grammar. Therefore, we figured that the regular tools that they work with-the three articles, the connectives, the parts of speech, the pre-modifiers and post-modifiers etc while approaching language in any literary or non-literary text(s)-could be reintroduced to them in a new fashion. What else could be a better policy to approach a text (literary or
scientific and so forth) than by analysing it as a discourse, and applying into it the
devices (cohesion, coherence etc) as used in discourse analysis? Constituent
analysis basically tells us how a text (a larger unit of any language) can be broken
into its smallest units so as to show how those units combinedly can make a larger
text possible, which eventually is infused with “meaning” beyond the clause and
above the sentence. Constituent analysis simultaneously calls in for IC (Immediate
Constituent) analysis, which can be shown through the tree diagram, and which
aims at breaking a larger unit into two, and then further into two until we reach the
smallest constituents (noun, pronoun, verb, article etc). The very poem for today’s
discussion, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in its entirety can be examined
through IC analysis, with its inevitable limitations notably the failure of analysing
any interrogative or imperative sentence, the ambiguity of meaning, different
phrases in the same pattern resulting in inescapable semantic gaps etc. Yet we
would make an attempt to give an IC analysis of a representative verse line, “I do
not think that they will sing to me” (125), replicating a complex sentence-pattern,
from the selected text to unwind the crooked course of subordination (hypotactic)
by employing the IC analysis:

![Fig. 1. An IC analysis of subordination](image-url)
For the sake of the constituent analysis, we shall employ the devices (discourse markers) as well as the procedural approach on the basis of the book *Text and Discourse Analysis* by Raphael Salkie. The procedure will not be a detailed one, as touching upon the pivotal aspects and demonstrating them through a few instances may suffice very well. Following Salkie, we have divided the devices needed for the constituent analysis into three sections with the labels – a. lexical cohesion, b. other kinds of cohesion, and c. beyond cohesion. We shall travel across the whole poem and randomly select different verse lines as samples for our analysis. We reckon this process of random selection of verses for the stated analysis will not impair our project, it (the process) will rather reinforce the project in the sense that the representative specimens are quite able to substantiate other left out verses (not every verse though), which can also be analysed by using the identical method.

Let us start with lexical cohesion. Under this label are four subcategories namely i. repetitive words, ii. synonyms, iii. superordinates and hyponyms, and iv. opposites. The key words, which are repeatedly used in a text, essentially make it a coherent whole. Many words are used more than once in a text; they surely contribute to the totality, but lack in specific predominance: the content words. There are yet certain words which are used less often than those that crop up more than once with more significance: the function words. In the first stanza of the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, the word “streets” has been used two times in line no. 4 and 8. The very word “window-panes” has been used three times (in line no. 15, 16, and 25). “Streets” and “Window-panes”, though not very frequently used, can be termed as content words, as the former signals the vertical descent motive (started with the dark and deathly sky’s downward trajectory towards the streets as if the glum ambience reflected through the sky is now about to be merged with the streets in an attempt to relate emotions through “objective correlative” – a notable technique traceable in Eliot’s poetry) of J. Alfred Prufrock; and the latter analogises Prufrock’s recoiling tendency with the thwarted effort of “the yellow fog” (15) alluding to a cat that faces the barrier of “window-panes”. Despite its several mentions in different lines, the very word “time”, in contrast to the notion of content words, can be said to act as a function word on account of its
indication of the central theme of the poem: the socio-psychosexual paralysis of the hero.

Synonyms have not been in abundance in the total framework of the poem. A synonym is a word that has the same meaning as of the original but the meaning is not thoroughly exact. Synonyms are used to bring in a little variety. The repetition of the word “dying” does not necessarily imply that both are the same, rather they are synonymous with each other, with a little variation (change) of class (52). The “evenings” (50), “mornings” (50), and “afternoons” (50) are set against each other to record register differences based on time, while “life” (51) contrasting with “coffee spoons” (51) are formal registers. More appropriate synonyms can be traced in line no. 59 and 61 respectively: “begin” and “presume” connote Prufrock’s going ways around the topic and thereby finding a tool to procrastinate. These words have certainly heightened the desired effect.

When a more specific word is an instance of a more general word, the specified word in relation to the general word is called a hyponym, and the latter is called a superordinate. Hyponyms can have their subordinate hyponyms depending on the elaborateness of the relevant area of the vocabulary. A hyponym contains in it the fuller and richer meaning (than its superordinate). In the opening stanza, we can go down the hierarchy of the superordinate through three consecutive phrases: “tedious argument” (8) > “insidious intent” (9) > “overwhelming question” (10). They can also be seen on the same plane as cohyponyms to each other. “The yellow fog” (15) or the “yellow smoke” (16) in an allusion to a cat can be supposed as a living organism, and thereby bearing the mark of superordinate, giving in the ramification of cohyponyms seen through “back” (15), “muzzle” (16), “tongue” (17) etc. Likewise, “the chambers” (129) can be treated as a hyponym to the superordinate “the sea” (129).

Oppositeness between words can also be used as a cohesive device. The opposition can be extreme/absolute as to register a binary contrariety, or else there can be such opposites as antonyms or conversenes, where the opposition cannot be seen in its full extremity, or at best it supplements each other. “You” (89) and “me” (89) can be perceived in their dialogic disposition. They can be two different
identities opposing each other: Prufrock as “me”, the tormented psyche, and “you” as his desired woman, who alters his words and finally cancels them out. In such a case, they will be binary opposites or incompatibles; and if “you” connotes the alter ego of Prufrock, then it basically is an opposite of converseness. “Prince Hamlet” (111) and “attendant lord” (112) are also in converse relation, while “the Fool” (119) being added to the stated two can be considered as multiple opposites resulting in anticlimax.

Next is the category of other kinds of cohesions. It again encompasses four subcategories: i. reference words, ii. substitutes, iii. ellipsis, and iv. connectives. There are some particular words which contribute to cohesion in regard to the constituent analysis by substituting words already used. It makes the text vivacious and dynamic in addition to brevity. The word “it” (11) in the initial stanza has substituted the phrase “an overwhelming question” (10). By using a short form of impersonal pronoun (it) Prufrock’s unwillingness to face the question has more been reinforced. The term “all” (55) substitutes the “x-rayed version” of the noun phrase “the eyes” (55). Again, “this” (103) has substituted a larger clause in the previous line, “after the skirts that trail along the floor” (102), and thus it acts as a clause substitute.

A very common device employed for analysing cohesion in certain contexts is ellipsis which means to leave out. By ellipsis any larger unit is trimmed into a short, pithy and more striking unit. In the beginning of two consecutive verse lines (line no. 17 and 18), the headnoun, “The yellow smoke” (16) prior to those lines is ellipsised. The starting verse line in the sixth stanza has almost been dropped out in the third line excepting the headnoun “time” (39). Thus it can be shown as an example of clause ellipsis. Line no. 112 bears the testimony of noun ellipsis at the very start of the line and verb ellipsis at the end.

Reference words do not have any separate entities unless and until they act as instruments of referring back to something else on any particular occasion. When they refer to contiguous text, they are known as text reference, and when they point to the real world, that is to say, outside of the text, they are called situation reference. The personal pronoun “our” (12) in the last verse line of the first stanza
refers back to “you and I” (1) in the opening line. Here, it is used as text reference. Nevertheless, the word can be attached to the outside context as well, since the identities of “you” and “I” do not seem clear and specified. From this stance, it can also be treated as situation reference.

It so happens oftentimes that two different parts—within a sentence or between sentences—are conjugated in meaning. Sometimes this conjugation seems explicit, or it may be retained implicit and left completely for the reader to decipher. A good number of words and phrases can act as bridge builders or connectives. Salkie offers us four types such as i. addition connectives (ACs), ii. opposition connectives (OCs), iii. cause connectives (CCs), and iv. time connectives (TCs). The additive “and” has been used many a times not merely to connect the lines, rather to approach the fragmentation scattered over the poem little by little, and to adumbrate a slow, drooping movement of time, sometimes caricaturing the shallow showiness of the modern civilization much akin to the absurdity in its entire meaning. The Opposition connectives like “or”, “but”, “though” have been used to mirror the contradictions and indecisiveness of the hero. The use of Cause connectives is very unusual, except for “when”, “then”, “for” etc, signifying the mental projection of cause and effect to ladder up and down the dilemma thrown by J. Alfred Prufrock in a few scattered lines. Time connectives like “now”, “then”, “when”, “before” etc do not hint upon any regular fragmented time, rather they project a seamless duration which slowly culminates the protagonist’s indecision, revisions and again indecisions.

The third section of cohesive discussion is a little abstract; abstract, because in this level we cannot rely upon the surrounding text to extract meaning(s), we need to look beyond the adjacent sentences to the real world, the environment, to connect the given text to the exophoric referential milieu in order that the total meaning can be brought out. Salkie has suggested a four-step-approach to look into the larger patterns: a. background, b. problem, c. solution, and d. evaluation. We shall not linger much on this arena because in the third phase while discussing dialogic form of the given discourse, the proffered approach by Salkie can be analysed more in its real depth. However, the title and the epigraph of the poem can be regarded as the background since both of them seem apparently dissociated
from the surrounding text; subsequently, the text itself is a problem, which needs a solution, i.e. the extrinsic or intrinsic analysis of the given poem; and after having attained a solution the readers are given the authority to evaluate and re-evaluate it.

Understanding poetry by applying the constituent analysis, as shown above, alongside mastering over the rules of poetics and picking up the tools used in it for stylistic analysis, or to put it differently, with a little hyperbolic ambition, formalist criticism can be proven as an apposite technique. It is more so, because students just stepping into an almost unfamiliar world of literature (in Bangladeshi context, of course) have a very scanty knowledge of such high-flown literary terms and the grandiose expressions used in rhetoric and prosody. The uninviting countenance of poetics and stylistics together with their (students’) unaccustomed epitome of knowledge back them off from a spontaneous and curious reading of a poem like “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, a more complicated and modernist of that sort. The Three R’s of their grammatical knowledge and their ABC of literature in association with a moderate version of discourse analysis tailored and appropriated for their level can effectuate more than formalist approach in the beginning.

Granted that the constituent analysis is more pragmatic and more effective, still, without realising the internalised structure-system (the langue) that establishes the parole, the poem as a whole, and then by resetting it in the continuous form of tradition of that very genre, it is never possible to get to the poetry, let alone a poem in isolation. The institutionalised system and the underlying appliances (structures, a set of interpersonal rules and norms jointly brings the utterance of the poem into the light. Therefore, our trivalent analysis has placed the structuralist reading of the poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in the second phase.

Post-structuralism definitely being the dominant trend of the present age is enjoying its presidency all around the alley and broad streets of literary genres. We will not be here engaging our analysis in the same trend of deconstructing the structure, as many believe that Eliot had done in this poem; rather our aim is to discover structure in this acclaimed poem, where critics often find violence in the language and ideas defying traditional structure of love poem and thus labeling it a brand of Eliotic enigma.
“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a dramatic monologue – a groundbreaking piece though in its own merit, where we can hardly trace an implied listener unlike the traditional dramatic monologue of Eliot’s predecessors. Without disclosing any single incident, here, in this love poem we get a confused and split person’s acknowledgement of his self-inflicted torture on his own psyche. This poem certainly follows a structure of its own from the beginning till the end, where Eliot deploys certain techniques to achieve the best possible effect on the confused modern poetry readers.

Starting from the epigraph, we can trace the implied structure in the making of the shape of the monologue, where the traditional listener is being shut up within the self of middle aged, indecisive and too much logical J. Alfred Prufrock, so that the secrecy of his self recognition remains unheard by the human beings around him. Then Eliot begins the poem in a dramatic momentum with an intangible proposal made by Prufrock to his dumb and imprisoned counterpart. With his frequent use of objective corollaries (“yellow fog”, “yellow smoke” etc.), Eliot expresses the haze and confusion of the time as well as the speaker. The meaning system of the poem works through the introduction of “You” and “I” who start the catechistic journey together with posing questions fifteen times and figuring out answers of self enlightenment until at the end when they are merged into “We” and meet the ultimate destiny of metaphorical death by drowning themselves. The epigraph thus finds its perfection in terms of relating the all important secrecy between the unconscious speaker and the listener – both of whom lose their unconscious existence only when “human voices wake” (131) Prufrock, and he gets back to his conscious level of existence.

In the first part of the poem, Eliot deploys a recurrent refrain “In the room the woman come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo” (13-14) to hold the physical settings of a cityscape of a “soft October night” (21) and the lingering time together to emphasize the psychological warfare between decision(s) and indecision(s). This structural balance is further carried on with a rapidly growing diffidence of Prufrock regarding his physical imperfection providing more grounds in favor of his indecisive mental structure. The binary opposites of his character become more evident when the amorous self grows anxious about the distantly familiar woman
and her eyes, arms, hair as well as the perfume from her dress and at the same time his dormant self reminds him of his tormenting inadequacies to pose a series of questions like “Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?” (45-46), and “And should I then presume?” (68). So, the confused structure of the love poem has more been crystallised at this point with a seemingly purposeful narrative to juxtapose decision(s) by indecision(s) and vice versa.

The structure of the meaning system of the poem works in the later part in a more formulated way where the alter ego of Prufrock suffers an existential crisis and does not find “the strength to force the moment to its crisis” (80), rather we get a new form of self recognition. The process of this self recognition is very much direct, which gives the poem’s meaning a new dimension through a series of proclamations. Prufrock announces of his being afraid of the possible consequences, if he ever exposes his feelings for the woman. Here, we also find his another self being busy in finding possible pretext questioning the worthiness of his any such step while forecasting a ready made answer from the lady in the form of yet another refrain: “That is not it at all/ That is not what I meant at all” (109-110). The process of self recognition gets to its height with the allusion of prince Hamlet. Prufrock cannot even be a tragic hero like Hamlet, because he finds himself fit only to be compared with “an attendant lord” and this process of self recognition gets to the level of his extreme frustration when he discovers himself as almost ridiculous a character, “the Fool”, having limited stock activities, nothing of which is serious like proposing a lady. The meaning system of the poem becomes very much emphatic with his sense of growing “old” (120) with old manners and fashion and with the premonition that “the mermaids” (124) will not sing to him. The series of these proclamations make the binary opposites of Prufrock’s psyche more decisive with indecisions, and the structure of the poem achieves its destination of being thoroughly indecisive.

Structuralist reading might sound sufficient if otherwise never happened. The all pervading and centripetal structure-system runs the risk of creating a blind spot where intertextuality or the silence goes surreptitiously subliminal; hence the structure which operates the internalised laws can ultimately fall down. Again, structuralism deals too strictly with the text alone, which completely overlooks the
cultural and neohistorical perspectives. Here is felt the need of dialogics which will be discussed in the third phase.

Cleanth Brooks in his eponymous essay “The Formalist Critics” with a purpose of propounding the basic responsibilities of formalist critics (readers as well) assumes that “speculation on the mental process of the author takes the critic away from the work into biography and psychology” (Rivkin and Ryan 53). In another place in the same essay, he asserts that “instead of focusing on the varying spectrum of possible readings, he attempts to find a central point of reference from which he can focus upon the structure of the poem or novel” (Rivkin and Ryan 54). A formalist critic needs, as Brooks argues, to be freed (totally) of two risks respectively: a. intentional fallacy, and b. affective fallacy. Our third-phase-analysis, to put in other words, dialogic criticism takes such notions into account. Our traditional teaching method (again in Bangladeshi context) generally blindfolds the freshmen in the bud by relating the text directly to the author’s biography and psychology. This process continues without possible rescue until one day they are met with such non-conformist writings as one stated above. In the excerpt of his epitomizing book Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics taken from The Bakhtin Reader edited by Pam Moris, Bakhtin analogises and contrasts his (Dostoevsky’s) path-breaking technique of dialogics with that of Tolstoy’s monological manner, and quite boldly affirms that “self-consciousness” (93) is the dominant feature of a “hero’s image” (93), and where the author deploys “dialogue” (93) which, in effect, is organized as “an unclosed whole” (93). We shall try to approach T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” keeping in mind some viewpoints of Bakhtin’s proposed techniques of dialogics.

Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky being the creator of polyphonic novel does not let his works fit in any of the predetermined paradigm; it is because he alongside his authorial consciousness lets the hero emerge with his own consciousness, which will never be merged into the author’s unified field of vision. The sameness of the voices (not only of the hero but other characters too) side by side enables them to be located in the same space where all the voices are equally valid. Though this hypothesis is aimed at the “new novelistic genre” (Morris 89), let us move toward “Prufrock” with this new perspective to investigate whether this can be applied in
case of poetry (Eliot in particular) or not. The poem starts in the fashion of dramatic monologue, but quickly breaks away with the tradition when we abruptly confront an epigraph written in an alien language without any English translation. As soon as we decipher the encoded message in the epigraph, we are ensured of a conscious poetic distance. Guido da Montrefeltro as an intimidated but at the same time an unconsciously careless speaker is within himself an independent character, a free entity fused with self-consciousness. It may so happen that Dante who delivers Guido’s message to us can simultaneously act upon the role of a reader. Unlike Dante’s *Inferno*, Eliot’s “You” and “I” in the given poem may be the same person, the counterpart may be the alter ego of Prufrock, or they may be two different existences that keep altering. The effacement of identity is a conscious effort in Eliot’s poetry (which is more distinct in his *The Waste Land*). Another possibility can be hypothesised by putting Prufrock in the position of the eternally damned and imprisoned Guido and presuming “you” as Dante, the message deliverer. The “you” can again be the woman Prufrock woos, or the narcissistic bisexual counterpart of Prufrock himself. By opening the alleys for multi-consciousnesses and multi-leveled explanation for the speaker(s), Eliot unleashes every latent opportunity to be expounded by Bakhtinian dialogics.

Bakhtin promulgates that Dostoevsky’s mode of creative visualization was not “evolution” (90), but “coexistence” (90) and “interaction” (90). According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky tries to create double-imaged personality that coexists in the same space, and not in time; they interact and contradict as separate consciousnesses (as Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov etc) do. In the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, the quick altering tendency of the characters let in multi-leveled consciousnesses. The “yellow fog” allegorizing a cat (but not as a good portent in this poem, yet having a feminine connection as is supposed about felines) tries to break open the ‘window-panes’, fails in its effort, circles round the corner, and finally failing again, goes back to sleep. This paralytic propensity with the symbol of lingering time forced towards sleep signifies eternal aridity. The cat builds up a consciousness of its own, though (it) is very easily analogisable with Prufrock, the frigid impotent hero of the poem. The intended(s) of Prufrock never remains the same. They alter; their gesticulations are misinterpreted by Prufrock,
but the author keeps the dilemma open as to finalise a comment or two about the woman/women Prufrock pursues. It is uncertain who is suffering whose curse. How can we say for sure that “Mr. Prude in a frock” (Prufrock) is passed for an innocent man? He is also “formulated” (56), and conventionalised; and finally his reversible nature unfinalises every possible prediction about him. At the end of the extract, we locate Bakhtin’s standpoint about the conclusiveness of the characters. He suggests that in the great dialogue of a dialogic novel like that of Dostoevsky, an author acts as an “organizer” (96) and “participant” (96) without retaining for himself the “final word” (96), which is to say, he does not presuppose the finalisability of the characters he creates/portrays, he leaves them unfinished and unfinalised, the dialogic disposition is thus organised as an “unclosed whole”. So are the destination(s) of the characters in the given poem. Eliot draws the conclusion in such a way which permits the readers to bring in multiplicity of explanation: Prufrock may have died, or he may continue living the same stereotypical life, he may have already been dead in the course of life, or he may indulge in vagaries and narcissistic pleasures to escape reality, and what not! The most important point in this connection is that all the characters live in relation to, contradiction and coexistence with each other; they never merge in the spatiality of the single moment, and finally the author keeps himself off from his dominant monologic unified vision.

Any literary genre, regardless of its specific designation, needs to be made entertaining enough at the very start, as well as thought-provoking for the learners (freshmen at the tertiary level) so that they may go a long way to analyse the text in its entirety, and from different perspectives. Keeping in view of these twofold responsibilities, we would like to take the indulgence of proffering the aforementioned trivalent analysis. It solely depends upon the nuance of the teacher(s) as to which phase(s) of the three-phase-analysis s/he should start with while approaching a text. We would rather suggest a mixed approach as per requirement at different stages of their (learners’) academic life. We, as teachers, need to remember that applying literary theories and stylistic machinery for the purpose of analysing a text may sound more curious, but how the learners react to our application(s) should be regarded as the topmost priority. To conclude, we
want to proclaim that the triadic analysis elucidated above may seem lacking in finding a strong ground, but it plausibly sets a new mode for the beginners of literary studies, who can apply the lexicographical knowledge, can explore the systematized structural issues in approaching a poem (a literary genre), and finally can survey the “silence” of “unfinalisability” of the characters, which may enthuse them into discovering new horizons of literary criticism(s).

Notes


Works Cited


