Liberal Humanism

Liberal humanism is a traditional Western approach to arts and literature characterized by the following assumptions:

1. Good literature is of timeless significance and speaks to what is constant in human nature. It must be
   − “sincere” in its avoidance of cliché, or of over-inflated forms of expression; it must not be
     manipulative.
   − “silent” in its showing and demonstrating of something, rather than the explaining, or saying, of it.

2. Human nature is essentially unchanging.
   − The same passions, emotions, and even situations are seen again and again throughout human
     history. This attitude corresponds to “transcendent reference” approach to literature that finds it
     giving the reader access to permanent truths of human nature which transcend the particulars of
     time and place.
   − Individuality is something securely possessed within each human being as their unique “essence”
     which transcends environmental influences, can change and develop, but can not be transformed.

3. The purpose of literature is the enhancement of life and the propagation of humane values.

4. Form and content in literature must be fused in an organic way, so that the one grows inevitably from the
   other.

5. The literary text is “self-referent”: it contains its own meaning within itself and
   − does not require any literary-historical, socio-political and autobiographical contexts.
   − On the contrary: to understand the text well it must be studied in isolation through the close verbal
     analysis without prior ideological assumptions, political pre-conditions, or specific expectations of
     any kind.

6. The job of criticism is to interpret the text, to mediate between it and the reader as objectively as
   possible—that is to uncover the truth of a text.

The tenets of liberal humanism are in sharp contrast with modern “theory”—that is all post-1960s critical
schools. Theory sees liberal humanism as an approach to literature which 1) is impressionistic and imprecise in
its critical terminology since it seems to by-pass matters of form, structure, genre, and so on, and launches
straight into the discussion of matters of content; and 2) is driven by its moral convictions rather than by any
model of what constitutes a systematic approach to literary criticism, and is bent on purpose of teaching readers
about life and transmitting humane values. Theory refuses to accept the liberal humanist method as simply the
“natural” and taken-for-granted way of “doing” literature.

Liberal humanism developed two distinct “tracks”:

The “text-led” PRACTICAL CRITICISM TRACK (Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis)
tends to center upon the close analysis of the work of particular writers, and gives a tradition of “close reading.”

The “ideas-led” PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICISM TRACK (Sidney, Wordsworth, Coleridge, George Eliot, and
Henry James) tends to tackle big general issues concerned with literature: How are literary works structured?
How do they affect readers or audiences? What is the nature of literary language? How does literature relate to
the contemporary and to matters of politics and gender? What can be said about literature from a philosophical
point of view? What is the nature of the act of literary composition?
** TERMS: **

- **Touchstone** (Matthew Arnold): evaluation of literary works should be done against the Touchstone—i.e. works of great masters—whose use of language, esthetics, thought, themes and so on are the clearest criteria for criticism and set standards for literature.

- **Practical Criticism** (Britain: I. A. Richards) or **New Criticism** (USA): a technique which advocates a close study of literature by isolating the text from history and context.

- **Close reading** (F. R. Leavis): a method of literary appreciation, which insists upon the primacy and self-sufficiency of the “words on the page,” removes the text from all contexts and presents it for unaided explication by the trained mind.

- **Dissociation of sensibility** (T. S. Eliot): a way of describing the special qualities of mind and sensibility of the Metaphysical poets and—for Eliot—of modern culture since the 17th century characterized by a separation of thought from feeling.

- **Poetic impersonality** (T. S. Eliot): poetry should be seen not as a pouring out of personal emotion and personal experience, but as a transcending of the individual by a sense of tradition which spoke through, and is transmitted by, the individual poet.

- **The objective correlative** (T. S. Eliot): a vehicle for expressing an emotion in art through gesture, action, or concrete symbolism, rather than through approaching it directly or descriptively.

- **Ambiguity** (William Empson): basic attitude towards language (in literature) as a very slippery medium which contains meanings the speaker had not suspected of being there at all.

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** Theory, i.e. most modern approaches, share certain recurring underlying ideas:**

1. **ANTI-ESSENTIALISM:** Most notions of human existence—including gender identity, individual selfhood, and the notion of literature itself—are fluid and unstable things, rather than fixed and reliable essences. They are “socially constructed”—dependent on social and political forces and on shifting ways of seeing and thinking—and temporary rather than absolute. No overarching fixed “truths” can ever be established.

2. **RELATIVISM:** All thinking and investigation is affected and determined by prior ideological commitment. Disinterested enquiry is untenable; every practical procedure, also in literary criticism, presupposes a theoretical perspective. Relativism disables argument and any kind of commitment.

3. **TEXTUALITY:** Language conditions, limits, and predetermines what we see. All reality is constructed through language—everything is a linguistic and textual construct. Language does not record reality, it shapes and creates it, so that the whole of our universe is textual.

4. **CONTINGENCY:** No reading is definitive. The meanings within a literary work are never fixed and reliable, but always shifting, multi-faceted and ambiguous, functioning within the infinite webs of meaning.

5. **FRAGMENTATION:** Theorists distrust all “totalizing” notions such as “literary canon,” “human nature,” or “eternal truth.” All generalized norms which are said to transcends the idea of a particular race, gender, or class are to be distrusted as usually Eurocentric and androcentric.