Exercise 1. Method: Narrative Criticism, A Plotting Exercise *(homework)*

Literary Criticism in General

Literary criticism is a broad term encompassing several different approaches to the literary text. When it was first applied to biblical interpretation in the 1950s and 1960s, the term was used for any form of close reading of the text, and therefore often encompassed earlier types of exegesis that examined the literary form of a pericope (form criticism) or the literary sources that were used by a given biblical author (source criticism). But since the 1960s, with the burgeoning of the field of literary criticism in the disciplines of English and global literatures, the term "Literary Criticism" in biblical studies has come to refer to a variety of approaches to the text and its readers that have emerged in these other disciplines.

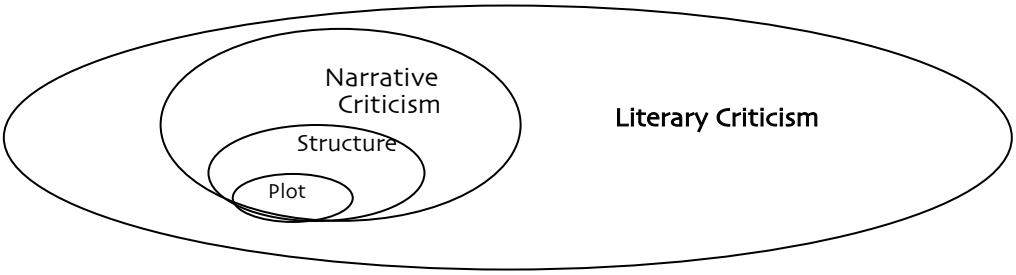
In general, all literary critical methods examine the final text of a given biblical book, as opposed to the origins of its parts. The literary critic assumes that the author worked with sources, but also that the author composed a new account from these sources — an account that has literary integrity. The critic may choose to focus attention on the text or the response of readers, and then within these categories to focus still further, for example on semiotics or narrative structures.

Narrative Criticism: A Type of Literary Criticism

The type of literary criticism we will practice this week is referred to as Narrative Criticism, because it focuses on the literary shape of a narrative text. You can use this type of method on a gospel, because gospels are narratives or stories. You wouldn't use this type of method on one of Paul's letters, because those are exhortations/letters, not stories.

The narrative critic examines the text to discern its aspect (fiction or non-fiction, prose or poetry), genre (history, legend, myth, etc.), structure (including plot, theme, irony, foreshadowing, etc.), characterization, and narrative perspective.

That's a lot to examine! And a narrative critic is usually looking at the whole gospel, or at least how one piece functions within the whole story. That's a bit too much for us to bite off in one week, though you might want to try it for your exegetical research paper. Instead, we'll just focus on one piece of the narrative puzzle: its structure. And within that piece, we'll narrow our focus even further to the plot of the narrative, that is, how the narrative is constructed.



"Plotting" refers to an author's selection and arrangement of episodes in a narrative. Episodes have different weights in the overall plot. Some clearly serve important functions in moving the plot along, while others play a supporting role, building in some way to the pivotal scenes or just adding color. Literary critic Seymour Chatman points out that some episodes clearly drive the plot (he calls these pivot episodes "kernels" and says that the plot can't function without them), while others don't play such an integral role and could be discarded without harming the plot (he calls these "satellites").[22]

[22] Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978).

Directions for Today's Exercise

Our goal this week is to analyze the structure of Mark's narrative. You will discover fairly quickly why narrative critics call Mark's gospel an "episodic narrative." It moves at a breathless pace through Jesus' Galilean ministry. Episode follows upon episode in quick succession, often with transitions no more elaborate than the word "and" (not great writing style, even in Greek!). There are very few apparent causal connections between episodes (a causal connection is when one episode happens, and *because of it* a later episode occurs).

Because you're probably more used to reading the gospels in snippets, and not straight all the way through, I'd like you to read a clean copy with no chapter and verse breaks, no study notes, no cross-references to biblical citations, no *nothing*. This way you won't get as distracted as you might reading a published version of the Bible. And because I want you to get a flavor for Mark's narrative style in Greek, the version of Mark that follows in this workbook is my own translation. You'll discover soon enough that my literal translation doesn't read like any version you've used. It will sound raw, rough, even offensive at times. I'm not doing this to be unduly provocative, but rather to give you the best possible sense of Mark's literary style, and to help you appreciate how much more polished Matthew and Luke are when we get to them. (You might also notice the liberties that your Bible's translators take to "elevate" the style of Mark.)

So what do you need to do besides read? I'd like you to mark the episode breaks as you find them, at least for the first 5 chapters. Use slashes to mark each episode change; double the slash mark if it's a major episode break. How do you know when an episode breaks, you might ask? Look for changes of **character**, **setting**, or **time of day**. The more of these apply to your break, the more major the break. Changes of setting or time are better indicators of episode breaks, since a single episode may have different characters coming in or out. Also, watch out for the narrator: if he adds some insight, cites proofs from scripture, or the like, it does not signal an episode break; rather, it generally adds color or interpretation to the existing episode.

In addition to marking the episode breaks, look for any kind of causal connections between scenes (does anything happen that causes something else? Are any episodes linked by vocabulary?). Using colored pencils or pens, circle or box repetitions of words and scenes to help you identify these links. Note any awkward syntax, grammar, or theology in the margins, as if you were correcting a paper draft. Bring the workbook to class so that we can discuss what you've discovered. Beyond that, there is no paper to write.

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