

## Critical Appreciation vs. Ethical Appreciation of a Piece of Literary Art

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### Abstract

The readers as per the established practices respond to a literary piece especially poetry when they critically appreciate it from a discerning point of view. This study, in deviation from the *traditional pedagogical adherence* (where the readers are expected to respond in line with the established practices) and in support of the aim of the new International Association of *Ethical Literary Criticism*, presents an analysis of a literary piece from an *ethical appreciation* point of view. Edmund Spenser's poem 'One Day I Wrote Her Name' is selected for this study. To answer the research question 'Can readers respond differently if they *ethically appreciate* a piece of literary art rather than *appreciating critically*?', this study discusses the richness and uniqueness of the *reader response theory*. As well, the researcher selects the excerpts of interview of Nie Zhenzhao, who, being the founder of *ethical literary criticism* in China, elaborates the theoretical frameworks and core concepts of *ethical literary criticism*. To conclude this article, the researcher presents 8 points pedagogical guide that is crucial in *ethical appreciation* of a piece of literary art.

**Keywords:** critically appreciation, ethical appreciation, ethical literary criticism, reader response theory etc.

### 1. Introduction

Critical appreciation is a specialized term in literary studies to assess, review, and analyze a piece of literary art. The process of critical appreciation according to the traditional pedagogical adherence requires the readers to evaluate, examine, and realize the social and historical context of a literary work. It, in the same breath, also encourages/expects readers to consider the author's intentions and the literary techniques and elements the author has used to convey the message through literary texts.

This study is least concerned with the discussion on literary elements like the rhyme scheme, diction, imagery, structure, rhythm, theme or the context and setting of a literary piece and its relevance to the period it was scripted. This study, though, advocates that the reader should look into the ethical perspectives of a text (while examining and evaluating a piece of literature without disregarding the artistic or literary perspective), which is to look for and embrace the moral, cultural, and humane elements like sympathetic and emotive attitude, rich morals, and the role of man in the human world.

The credit of this deviation, in researcher's opinion, should go to the *reader response theory*, which gained prominence in the late 1960s. It argues that any piece of literature should be

viewed as a performing art in which each reader creates his own, possibly unique, text-related performance. Rejecting the idea, Mora & Welch (n.d.) note that there is a single, fixed meaning inherent in every literary work; this theory holds that the individual creates his or her own meaning through a "transaction" with the text based on personal associations. Because all readers bring their own emotions, concerns, life experiences, and knowledge to their reading, each interpretation is subjective and unique.

It would be injustice if this study does not honor and acknowledge Nie Zhenzhao who conceptualized *Ethical Literary Criticism*. He (2015) abstracts that *ethical literary criticism* reads interprets and analyzes literature from an ethical perspective. It argues that literature is a unique expression of ethic and morality within a certain historical period, and that literature is not just an art of language but rather an art of text. In light of ethical literary criticism, moral enlightenment and education are literature's primary function, while aesthetic appreciation is merely second to it. Specifically, ethical literary criticism seeks to unpack the ethical features of literary works, to describe characters and their lives from the vantage point of ethics, and to make ethical judgments about them.

This study, to maintain the compatibility with the *Reader Response Theory* context and *Ethical Literary Criticism* arguments, upholds that any piece of literature is an art with no fixed and final appreciation/interpretation. Lessons of sympathetic and emotive attitude, rich morals, and role of man in the human world can be extracted through *ethical interpretation* rather than simply practicing *critical appreciation* of a text.

## 2. Research Question& Methodology

This study attempts to answer the question:

- Question:  
Can readers respond differently if they *ethically appreciate* a piece of literary art rather than *appreciating critically*?
- Methodology  
A contrastive appreciation (analysis) of Edmund Spenser's poem 'One Day I Wrote Her Name' is presented as a sample of *critical appreciation* vs. *ethical appreciation* of a piece of literary art.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study while discussing the traditional and established concept and approach of *critical appreciation* along with a sample or proposed version of *ethical appreciation*. To address the research question, a sample *ethical interpretation* of Edmund Spenser's poem 'One Day I Wrote Her Name' is presented.

### 3.1. Critical Appreciation

As per the contents of the webpage <http://criticalappreciation2009.blogspot.com> (2009), to be critical means to be able to judge the value of something or someone. To show appreciation, on the other hand, implies the ability to see the good or strength in something. Thus if we put the two

words together, to conduct a critical appreciation implies the ability to assess the value in something towards showing the strength or good of that something. Lunarko (2017) observes that critical appreciation is analyzing a work to evaluate its contents and explain why it should be appreciated. In general, a critical appreciation is something you write to investigate the qualities of a literary work. It means assessing, reviewing, and analyzing a piece of work, whether art or literature. In other words, critical appreciation is analyzing a work to evaluate its contents and explain why it should be appreciated. The reader has to look at the work from a literary standpoint and evaluate it from that perspective. Knowing literary terms and elements can help you to do so. Usually we attach a negative connotation to the word “criticism.” To criticize a person means to find fault or weakness in what the person has said or done or his or her physical appearance. Critical appreciation in literature, on the other hand, is the art of responding to and analyzing written works such as poetry, stories, plays, novels, and essays. It is a show of appreciation because this activity requires one to have some point about the written work and to support that point with evidence from the literary work. A critical appreciation of a poem requires of one to analyze the poem as a whole and critically provide insight into the elements which make up the poem, such as diction, imagery, structure, rhyme, rhythm, the overall message or theme of the poem or the purpose of the poet. Readerofbooks (2012) maintain that in critical appreciation, the reader while examines and evaluates a piece of literature from a discerning point of view, knows the work well enough to have an intelligent basis for liking or disliking something. Amarang9 (2013) says that critical appreciation should address the content and form of a literary piece. In discussing content, the critic should describe what the poem is about, possibly noting an author's intent, and/or noting different interpretations of the poem's meaning. In discussing form, the critic should address literary techniques and literary elements. Critical appreciation, in literature, is completely theoretical, hence, the opinions vary. Many critics have different theories of their own about how to judge a poem and how to think over it critically. Wordsworth stresses on the concept of beauty in a poem whereas Eliot makes it practical through his approach. Therefore, the appreciation varies from person to person and critic to critic.

### **3.2. Ethical Appreciation**

Ethical appreciation, as this study upholds, is a way to review a piece of literary art to instill and embrace the moral, cultural, and humane elements of literature like sympathetic and emotive attitude, rich morals, and role of man in the human world. It allows the readers to go beyond the aesthetic beauty, as mentioned above (abstract elements) and sense the moral, cultural, and humane values (concrete elements) of a piece of literary art. Although, the presence/existence of moral elements in critical appreciation process cannot be denied; the readers hardly notice/feel those elements. In reality, perhaps, literary techniques/elements dominance does not let readers to deviate from the traditional pedagogical practices.

To understand the ethical appreciation process, this study presents the concept of the *reader-response theory* and the excerpts of interview of Nie Zhenzhao, the founder of ethical literary criticism in China.

#### **3.2.1. Reader-Response Theory**

In its introduction, Shmoop Editorial Team (2008) posts:

...when you think about literature, you probably think of authors and texts. Authors write literary works. So, they're the ones who decide what a text means, right? And us readers? Well, we're secondary to authors, because hey, we're just readers. Yeah, not so fast. If you hadn't already guessed by the name of the movement, Reader-Response theory says that readers are just as important as the authors who write literary works. Hey, if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Same goes for *The Iliad* and *War and Peace*: if no reader is around to get through those hundreds of pages, then it's almost like that text doesn't exist. Don't let this blow your mind, but Reader-Response theorists actually think that readers are active participants who create a work of literature in the process of reading it. The meaning of a text, according to Reader-Response theorists, exists somewhere between the words on the page and the reader's mind. Think of it this way. If we say, "The Shmoop labradoodle totally ate that cupcake," each individual person reading that sentence will have a different image of the Shmoop labradoodle, of the Shmoop headquarters, and of the cupcake. Some readers will probably imagine a cute dog, others will imagine a naughty dog, and everyone will try to fill in the blanks to figure out what happened and why. It'll all depend on each individual reader's experience with dogs, cupcakes, and Shmoop. The interpretation each reader has will probably be similar, but each will be slightly different. The big contribution of Reader-Response theorists was to call attention to the importance of the reader in the making of literary meaning. Reader-Response theorists like to ask questions like: How do we feel when we read a certain poem, or a passage from a novel? Why do we feel that way? How does our psychology affect the way we read literary texts? How does each of us read differently? Only when we ask those questions, these theorists argue, can we truly begin to understand literature.

### 3.2.2. Excerpts of the interview of Nie Zhenzhao

In an interview with Charles Ross at the Comparative Literature Program, Purdue University, Nie Zhenzhao elaborates the theoretical frameworks and core concepts of his ethical literary criticism. Here are some excerpts of Nie Zhenzhao's responses:

- *...Ethical literary criticism, as conceptualized by Nie Zhenzhao, is a theory and methodology for reading, interpreting, understanding, analyzing and evaluating literature from an ethical standpoint.....*
- *...To some scholars, the terms of ethic and morality are considered interchangeable. However, to me, they are different. In my opinion, ethic is a general term encompassing both moral terms and immoral terms, while morality is a specific term excluding immoral terms.....*
- *...In the beginning of human civilization, the basic problem for human beings to solve is how to tell human beings from the rest of the animals. In contemporary society, it is possible for us to live a harmonious life as we know what we should do and how we should practice tenets of ethics or morality.....*
- *...In modern times, we abide by the existing social order which has been generally formulated on the basis of ethics. Literature, no matter it is in the written form or oral form, embodies social institutions, law and rules derived from ethics. Moral teaching function of literature remains unchanged despite the changes of conditions. ....*
- *...Unlike moral criticism, ethical literary criticism does not simply evaluate a given literary work as good or bad on the basis of today's moral principles. Instead, it emphasizes*

“historicism,” that is, the examination of the ethical values in a given work with reference to a particular historical context or a period of time in which the text under discussion is written....

- ...Here is a difference between ethical literary criticism and aesthetic criticism. The former takes literature as the tool for teaching people to be rational but the latter takes literature as the tool for getting aesthetic enjoyment of sensual pleasure. In short, ethical literary criticism sees literature significant in educating readers, while aesthetic criticism sees literature significant in bringing sensual pleasure.

### 3.3. Critical Appreciation vs. Ethical Appreciation

To establish a contrast between the *critical appreciation* and *ethical appreciation*, the excerpts of Nie Zhenzhao’s interview are presented:

- ...Here is a difference between ethical literary criticism and aesthetic criticism. The former takes literature as the tool for teaching people to be rational but the latter takes literature as the tool for getting aesthetic enjoyment of sensual pleasure. In short, ethical literary criticism sees literature significant in educating readers, while aesthetic criticism sees literature significant in bringing sensual pleasure.....
- ...However, ethical literary criticism does not deny the value of aesthetic criticism but takes it as one of the important means of understanding literature for ethical aims. Aesthetic criticism helps us to read and enjoy literature for receiving moral enlightenment. In other words, without any moral purpose, the aesthetics of literature would cease to exist. In ethical literary criticism, the primary purpose of literature is not to provide entertainment but to offer moral examples for human beings to follow by way of literary enjoyment, to enrich their material and spiritual life with moral guidance, and to achieve their self-perfection with moral experience. In brief, only by working together with morality can the aesthetic value of literature be fully realized.....

### 4. Contrastive Analysis of Edmund Spenser’s Poem

Following is the contrastive appreciation (analysis) of Edmund Spenser’s poem ‘One Day I Wrote Her Name’. An effort has been made to present a sample of *ethical appreciation* of a literary piece; however, the *critical appreciation* version has been adapted from Asghar 2016.

Introduction	Critical Appreciation	Ethical Appreciation
Title	Sonnet LXXV	alive event from human life
Poet	Edmund Spenser (c. 1554-1599)	a doer
Date of Composition	1592-1594	any related incident/citation
Collection	Amoretti and Epithalamion	events/examples
Poetic Genre	Spenserian Sonnet	emotive talk
Setting	A Beach	human life
The Speaker	A lover and poet	man
Content	Ocean, love, immortality and the great power of the almighty Poetry	good deeds and power of ethics

Table 1. Contrastive appreciation (analysis) of introduction of the poem

<b>Lines (1-2)</b>	<b>Critical Appreciation</b>	<b>Ethical Appreciation</b>
One day I wrote her name upon the strand, But came the waves and washed it away;	These lines set the scene: the speaker and his beloved Elizabeth Boyle are chilling at the beach. The speaker decides to get all romantic and write her name in the sand. However, the waves wash her name away. The writing on the sand refers to the lover's insistence on making a worldly impact on his beloved. The waves are metaphorically used to represent the futile attempt by man to fight back against the infinite vortex of time. In short, these lines showcase the speaker's pessimism of confronting time.	These lines set the stage of human life's reality. The speaker and his beloved are the images of folks (people) and affairs of this to-be-vanished world where everything is subject to decay and nothing is permanent, where everything around us is ever changing, ever dying. Man tries to capture the 'wealth' for long lasting, but he fails and becomes helpless against nature.

Table 2. Contrastive appreciation (analysis) of lines (1-2) of the poem

<b>Lines (3-4)</b>	<b>Critical Appreciation</b>	<b>Ethical Appreciation</b>
Again I wrote it with a second hand, But came the tide and made my pains his prey.	The speaker is pretty intrepid. He writes his beloved's name in the sand again. The tide comes in and washes her name away again. The reattempt of the speaker represents the continual meditative quality of humanity to contemplate the thought of not dying, yet it also seems to defy the logic because he knows that her name will be erased shortly after the waves hit. The speaker refers to his writing as "his pains" which are the "prey" of the cruel waves. He basically imagines that the waves are like a mean old predator, just waiting to pounce on his poor defenseless writing.	These lines show the human being's fearless or perhaps greedy nature. Man tries to re-arrest the 'mortal' elements of this world knowingly that his attempts are fruitless because all that exists on the earth will perish. Still, man's materialistic addiction (that has a habit of ruthlessly exploits others) often turns a blind eye from 'truth'.

Table 3. Contrastive appreciation (analysis) of lines (3-4) of the poem

Lines (5-6)	Critical Appreciation	Ethical Appreciation
<p>Vain man (said she) that dost in vain assay A mortal thing so to immortalise;</p>	<p>These lines show that the sonnet is a dialogue. The beloved says to the speaker that he is narcissistic and his attempt to preserve her name in the sand is silly and futile. She is telling him that his gesture will never work, that he is being proud in thinking that his writing is more powerful than the forces of nature. He is trying in vain to make her name immortal, when in fact it is mortal. In short, that beloved thinks that the speaker is making his bid for immortality out of vanity and self-satisfaction.</p>	<p>These lines reveal that worldly affairs (in the form of beloved) in different forms always convey the ‘decay’ message of this world and remind man that any attempt to counter ‘nature’ will remain in vain. ‘Man is mortal and Nature is immortal’ is undisputable. Man should not try to satisfy his desires out of arrogance. In Mahatma Gandhi’s words: <i>“Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed.”</i></p>

Table 4. Contrastive appreciation (analysis) of lines (5-6) of the poem

Lines (7-8)	Critical Appreciation	Ethical Appreciation
<p>For I myself shall like to this decay, And eke my name be wiped out likewise.</p>	<p>These lines are the continuation of the beloved's speech. She says that she, too, will decay and disappear, just as her name has disappeared from the beach. She, too, will be "wiped out". In Spenser's day, the word "eke" meant "also". It is one of those words that have been wiped out by the waves of time. So to summarize, the beloved thinks that the speaker is being a little silly by continually writing her name in the sand, and she recognized that, like her name, she won't live forever. However, she does not grasp the concept of life after death.</p>	<p>These lines in continuation of the previous verses reveal that the worldly affairs in different forms, again and again, ‘decay’ message of this world and remind man that any attempt to counter ‘nature’ will be impractical and childish. Man has to remember: <i>“Everything rises but to fall, and increases but to decay.”</i> --- Sallust</p>

Table 5. Contrastive appreciation (analysis) of lines (7-8) of the poem

Lines (9-10)	Critical Appreciation	Ethical Appreciation
<p style="text-align: center;">Not so (quod D); let baser things devise To die in dust, but you shall live by fame;</p>	<p>At this point in the sonnet, we get a classic volta, in which the poem changes its tune. So far, the poem has been all about mortality -- how nothing and no one can live forever. But now, the poem begins to say that actually, yes, some things do live forever. The dialogue shifts from the beloved to the speaker himself. He tells his beloved that the things that are less important than her will die and become dust. However, she will live forever by fame. In other words, the speaker thinks that death is for suckers and his beloved is most definitely not a sucker.</p>	<p>From these lines, the discourse has changed. The humane aspect of man speaks that there are 'immortal elements' in this world. He advocates that the world where everything is mortal and subject to decay also possess 'great' realities i.e. 'fame' or 'good deeds'. His 'beloved/love' may be interpreted/presented as 'good deeds' which cannot come under the ambit of 'decay' as long as this world lasts.</p>

Table 6. Contrastive appreciation (analysis) of lines (9-10) of the poem

Lines (11-12)	Critical Appreciation	Ethical Appreciation
<p style="text-align: center;">Mere verse your virtues rare shall eternise, And in the heavens write your glorious name:</p>	<p>In these lines the speaker describes how his beloved will forever. He says that his verse i.e. poetry will "eternise" all of his beloved's virtues, and that it will write her name in the heavens, not in the sand. The writing in the sand is just a child's play. However, poetry does all the heavy lifting in making someone eternal. His poetry will be so awesome that it will make her immortal. In short, the speaker wants to immortalize the glorious name and spiritual loveliness of his beloved through his poetry.</p>	<p>These lines convey an 'abstract' but 'humane/ethical' message. The man's strong belief that 'good deeds' will result in heaven which is eternal. In other words, man can be 'immortalize' through 'good deeds'. The following quote serves the purpose of the context:  <i>"If you go through life and you are selfish and do nothing, when you pass on, you'll be forgotten. If you do things for others in good deeds, through your deeds you will become immortal,"</i>  -----Daniel Pisaturo</p>

Table 7. Contrastive appreciation (analysis) of lines (11-12) of the poem

Lines (13-14)	Critical Appreciation	Ethical Appreciation
Where, when as Death shall all the world subdue, Our love shall live, and later life renew.	In this couplet the speaker either reveals himself to be the most loving boyfriend ever, or the most clueless one. He says to his beloved that death will kill everyone in the whole wide world. However, their love will go on forever because of his poetry. In other words, even though their physical love will die with their bodies, the essence of their love will exit forever in the enigmatic cosmos by renewing itself into the hearts of new lovers through the words of his poetry. In short, words eternalize a person and he or she can live on beyond the boundaries that apply to most humans.	These lines are the showcase of man's strong belief that his 'fame/good deeds' will remain untouched because of the 'good deeds' In other words, the man wants to immortalize through his 'good deeds'. His message to the world that 'good deeds' makes human being 'eternalize' far from human sufferings.

Table 8. Contrastive appreciation (analysis) of lines (13-14) of the poem

Literary Devices	Critical Appreciation	Ethical Appreciation
Rhyme Scheme	ABAB/BCBC/CDCD/EE	repeated events of human life with same end patterns
Meter Check	Iambic pentameter	examples of continuity from human experience
Alliteration	"Waves and washed", "pain and prey", devise, die, and dust", Verse and virtues", "where and when as", and "love, live, and later life".	'not to indulge to gain/regain', 'realities of human life'
Symbols	Name (beloved), tide (time), sand (memories)	affairs of this to-be-vanished world
Metaphor	Tide (predator)	nature of human being
Imagery	strand, name, waves, tide	affairs of this to-be-vanished world
Tone	Calm, resolute, and optimistic	ethical
Themes	Immortality, love, Literature and writing	'fame' and 'good deeds'

Table 9. Contrastive appreciation (analysis) of literary devices of the poem

<b>Sum up</b>	<b>Critical Appreciation</b>	<b>Ethical Appreciation</b>
Conclusion	Through his use of poetic techniques, Spenser succeeds at his experiment with literature. The surface narrative of the sonnet is about a lover expressing his love for a woman, however, the poem is actually about the contradiction between mortality and immortality - permanence and temporariness. The poem encapsulates the power of language in the sense that master poets have the ability to manipulate the English language in such a way that enables them to make grand assertions about life's most important questions in such short and beautiful lines. Even with the limitations of the human conditions, Spenser proves that poetry has the capacity to make one immortal. In short, it is one of the most famous sonnets Spenser ever wrote.	Here, through the use of ethical elements, the reader responds differently to the piece of literature. The description of the literary piece may be appreciated/interpreted in the context of human life/existence. The literary text enables the reader feel the life's most important 'realities' in a nutshell. Although, human conditions always face limitation, the ethical elements pave the ways (for readers) to embrace and exercise 'good deeds' to enjoy 'immortal' elements in the 'mortal' world.

Table 10. Contrastive appreciation (analysis) of conclusion of the poem

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, this research presents 8 points guideline, adapted from the excerpts of Nie Zhenzhao's interview, to help readers evaluate a piece of literary art from an *ethical* perspective. The following guide, if applied while appreciating a piece of literary art *critically* and *ethically* as presented under the findings/discussion of this study, will encourage readers respond differently.

The readers should:

1. look for the moral rules at play in a given set of circumstances to understand morality
2. uncover moral models, both as examples and as warnings, to develop the capacity to think about complex human interactions
3. look for a historically contingent presentation of ethics and morality to reap moral enlightenment and make better ethical choices
4. see the moral teaching of humanity to understand the ethics of living, know the world, and abide by the ethical order and moral codes
5. look for the imaginative presentation of ethics to live a good and happy life

6. look for social institutions, law and rules derived from ethics to abide by the existing social order
  7. examine the ethical values in a given work with reference to a particular historical context or a period of time or uncover ethical factors that bring literature into existence and the ethical elements that affect characters and events in literary works or illuminate issues concerning the events, the characters and their actions from an ethical perspective to (teach people and tell them how to) learn with the help of literary criticism
  8. analyze, interpret, evaluate the function of literature to enlighten, educate, instruct, and guide.
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