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## ***The Art of Literary Research* by Richard D. Altick**

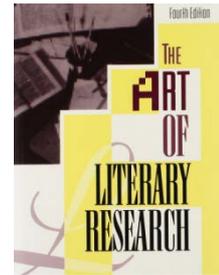
### **Reviewed by:**

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### **Adventure in sight**

A thirsty person needs water to quench the thirst. A bibliophile needs books to satiate the craving for reading. A literary researcher, who enrolls for a doctoral program, needs a guide to understand nitty gritty of the literary research. Voila! A book titled *The Art of Literary Research* was prescribed for reading. The book, whose fourth edition appeared in 1993, was written by Richard D. Altick with some contribution from John J. Fenstermaker. It remains true to its subject by being spread across 353 pages neatly categorized into eight chapters and an equal number of subchapters. For a person of maggie-made-in-two-minute generation, which prefers internet summaries over actual literary texts, reading this mammoth book on research seemed a clear impossibility. However, the motivation to do something worthwhile in a research career pushed me into action. I had one particular question in focus before starting the adventure: in what ways this book is going to benefit me as a novice researcher in the field of literature, whose research is often viewed as lacking essentiality and quality? The book offered more than what I expected. Written in a gripping narrative style with information structured in a way one finds in product manuals, reading the book proved a worthwhile adventure. Commenting on the subject matter of this book is apparently beyond my limited capability, yet I have ventured into reviewing it as a true “adventurer”. This review is written in first person for a purpose, and divided into four sections for focus in objective and ease in reading for end users.



### **1. Gripping narrative of a grand old man**

The epigraph defining “literature” in the very first chapter ‘Vocation’ caught my attention. It’s quite a comprehensive definition, and a vital part of the term “literary research”. As the chapter unfolded itself, in a lucid language and plenty of self-explanatory

paragraphs and examples, I realized that I am following a grand old man in his footsteps. The author reminded me of my grandparent, who was a terrific storyteller.

*Who is a literary scholar?*

We all know that criticism is the essence of literary endeavors. Altick also agrees that “literary research is devoted to enlightenment of criticism.”(4) However, he makes clear distinctions between critic and literary scholar, and research and scholarship. A critic is concerned with a literary work, its style, structure and content, while a literary scholar goes into the genesis and subsequent history of the literary work (1). He views research as an occupation whereas scholarship as a habit of mind and a way of life (20). In the works of literature, a character is created with various characteristics. Similarly, Altick thinks that qualities required in law and investigative journalism are essential for a literary researcher—principles of evidence, devotion to accuracy and detail, resourcefulness and recognizing and following up the leads (15). Further, he assigns intellectual curiosity, shrewdness, precision, imagination, accurate interpretation, evaluation and sense of history as vital attributes of the literary researcher (16-17). This first chapter not only made basic concepts clear but also infused enthusiasm to read more and finish the book.

**2. Human anomalies in literary outputs**

After having a clear idea of ‘what is a literary scholar?’ in the previous chapter, a doubt crossed my mind:

*Is there any problem with literary texts?*

The second chapter titled ‘The Spirit of Scholarship’ addresses this question: scholar’s business is partly constructive i.e. adding to sum of knowledge related to literature and its makers and partly descriptive i.e. exposing and dispelling mistakes in literary works. (23) So, the author points out the basic human tendency—“to err is humane”. The literature is produced by humans, so there’s always a possibility of errors. In a subchapter dedicated to “error”, the author cites examples of Ezra Pound’s ‘Seafarer’, Thomas Gray’s letters, William Mason’s editing, Hazlitt’s letters and other Romantic and Victorian poets to show prevalence, progress and persistence of errors in literary works (24-35).

*What if a literary researcher gets hold of multiple versions of a single episode from the life of an author?*

Altick discusses this problem in the subchapter ‘Examining evidence’ by giving examples from the life of Johnson, Keats and many more. An event of charity transaction in the life of Johnson was reported by three different people—James Boswell, Mrs Thrale and Richard Cumberland. There were discrepancies in their versions. Instead of outrightly rejecting any version, Altick showed a possible way of discovering the truth.

The last subchapter deals with ‘fixing dates and testing authenticity’ of a literary work. Altick brings forth multiple examples, including the following: Swin Burne’s ‘Triumph of Love’ wherein it is assumed that Jane Faulkner had laughed out loud upon listening to the poem (55). However, a cross-examination of the date of her birth and the publication of the poem reveals that she was too young to react to the poem in so expressive a way. Yet, the possibility that Ms Faulkner would have been a prodigy remains open.

### **3. Canvas of literary research**

My curiosity to understand the art of literary research is partly satisfied---by this moment I understood what it means to be a literary scholar and the anomalies I may encounter in the world of literary research. But the question that needed answer is:

*Where is the canvas to express my artistic skills?*

In the chapter titled ‘Scholarly occupations’, the author takes readers on an enlightening tour of major domains of literary research—textual study, problems of authorship, search for origin, tracing reputation and influence, and cultivating a sense of the past. These are also areas wherein a literary scholar may try his/her skills. A critic or a literary scholar, whose efforts typically revolve around a literary work, needs a dependable version of the work. It is simply because an authoritative text is indispensable for informed criticism. Altick observes that the “history of literary texts was deeply affected by.....the trembling hand and the blurred eyesight.” (70) A text may contain errors, multiple versions and editions. In the case of Henry James’ ‘The Ambassadors’, chapter 28 and 29 were switched in order; the phrase “coiled fish” was inadvertently changed to “soiled fish” in Melville’s ‘White-Jacket’, poems of W.B. Yeats were misprinted, etc. After giving

aforementioned examples, the author suggests that the literary scholar dealing with printed books from the past requires familiarity with following concepts: analytical bibliography (knowledge of printing process); descriptive bibliography (printing history of the book), and critical bibliography (problems of meaning).

A researcher dealing with the problem of authorship may come across following scenarios: anonymous or pseudonymous work, multiple authors in a single work, or works attributed to an author which may or may not be of him/her. In order to verify authorship, Altick prescribes two remedies: find out idiosyncrasies of style of the author, and perform stylometric analysis (97). It may be done by examining internal evidence (contentual i.e. ideas, typography etc.) and external evidence (referred to by another work /author).

#### *How to trace similarity between works?*

In the chapter titled ‘Search for Origins’, obviously of literary works, Altick tells us that a work is shaped by the whole experience of life of the writer. So, source study has to be performed if there is any problem of similarities between two or more works. What does a source study do: it concentrates on literary origins—of phrase, image, plot, character, device and idea an author accumulated through reading. How does it help? To answer this question, Altick cites the example of Rosamond Tuve’s study of George Herbert’s ‘The Sacrifice’. In this study, Tuve gave three objects of source study: illuminating meaning and deepening feeling, biography elements in poem, and intertextuality. There two ways in which similarity creeps in: Direct source i.e. borrowing and reminiscence; Indefinite or diffused source i.e. parallel passage and echo. Altick also notes that some opinions and assumptions are nobody’s and everybody’s, and remain in free circulation in respective times. A good example is books prescribed as part of syllabus at school and college levels.

#### *Is it possible to trace reputation and influence?*

Yes, it is possible. Altick shows us in the subchapter titled ‘Tracing reputation and influence’. By reputation, he meant author’s or work’s impact on critics and readers. On the other hand, influence means the effect of the author or work on other authors in the next generations. Reputation can be traced by the number of copies sold, editions, adaptations, mentions in other articles, reviews, books, etc. Tracing influence could be tricky as it is a “multifaceted” concept that ranges from “wholesale plagiarism... to a kind of spiritual

discipleship.”(130) Altick cites cases of sale by public auction of luxurious household goods mentioned in *Vanity Fair* and *Dombey and Son*. The actual sale of items of Stowe House happened in Aug-Sept 1848 and those of Gore House took place in May 1849. But *Vanity Fair* came out in May 1847, whereas *Dombey and Son* appeared in April 1848. So, it may be noted that the dates and other bibliographic do not certify that the supposed influence had occurred.

*Does a researcher working on a text from the past need to know the past?*

The answer is in affirmative. For Altick, a researcher studying the books from the past needs to cultivate a sense of the past too. Because it enables him or her to place the author or work among all other authors/works in preceding times or eras. It helps in distinguishing original and innovative, commonplace and conventional (136). For example, in order to understand what Shakespeare’s plays meant to the first audience, the researcher needs to acquaint himself with the knowledge of various domains of the Elizabethan period. In fact, he must be aware of intellectual history (ideas/thoughts), social history (how people lived), and literary history (meanings of the text from time to time) apart from familiarity with the vocabulary of that time. Altick points out common errors in the study of literary history as well.

#### **4. Treasure hunt and houses of wisdom**

Knowledge is a treasure. An expedition is a must for hunting it. The chapter titled “Finding material” tells us in what forms and where we can get it, whereas the following chapter on “libraries” locates the houses of wisdom. Following are categories of information and selected sources, which Altick lists:

- a. Bibliographies: general, thematic, topic-wise, etc. Literary History of the United States (LHUS) or Marcue’s A Reference Guide for English Studies.
- b. Annual lists: MLA International Bibliography or Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (MHRA)
- c. Catalogues: Library of Congress Catalogue, National Union Catalogue, General Catalogue of Printed Books
- d. Manuscripts: Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States by Hamer’s, Index of Manuscripts in the British Library, Humanities Index, etc.

- e. Online Resources: Online Computer Library Center (OCLC)
- f. Dictionaries: Oxford Dictionary, etc.

Prior to directing readers to libraries, Altick gives a general advice: “note where the leading researchers in your field go to do their work”, whose reference can be found in acknowledgements and footnotes (184). He regards Harvard as the crown of academic libraries. His list ranges from Library of Congress to British Library, and Yale’s Sterling Library to Folger Shakespeare Library. In a digital world, physical libraries located in America or Britain may not attract a researcher in India or any other part of the world. Google Scholar appears more relevant than these libraries.

The next chapter on ‘Making Notes’ looks insignificant but relevant. The last but one chapter titled ‘Philosophy of Composition’ carries a powerful statement, “the hallmark of good scholarly prose is lucidity”. (220) Altick gives us a golden rule of communication: “Say what you have to say, and when you have said it, quit.” (225) Apart from this advice, he shows us the process of composition: first prepare an outline, then write down and finally rewrite. He also illustrates the importance of the first paragraph, final paragraph, and the remaining paragraphs in between them. He recommends following MLA style guide in literary writings.

The book ends with “The Scholar’s Life”, which reiterates that once a person becomes a scholar, he or she never ceases being one. A set of prerequisites that Altick recommends to literary scholars are: company of books, pleasure of travel, unlooked for adventure, and frequent encounter with delightful and helpful people. Finally, the grand old narrator advises young researchers: “our profession has no room for intemperate criticism of any kind” (253).

### **Final words**

The book is a manual for budding literary researchers. It answers whats, whys and hows of literary research with a lot of examples from American and British literature of Romantic and Victorian periods. The author appears to have extracted his life-long learning in giving techniques, strategies and areas of literary research. He shows that the literary research could be bibliographical, biographical or a combination of both. Towards the end of the book, he also suggested a list of topics for possible research. The only chaff in the grains

appears to be his portions of advice, especially concerning libraries and finding material. With the advent of the internet and its related technologies useful in writing and publishing, these portions do not appear significant anymore. In a nutshell, the book is a great read for a novice and an expert alike.

**Work Cited:**

Altick, Richard D., and John J. Fenstermaker. *The Art of Literary Research*. 4th ed., New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1993.