

Ten tenets of liberal humanism

— the corpus of attitudes, assumptions, ideas, values and beliefs in English criticism

1. The first thing, naturally, is an attitude to literature itself; **good literature is of timeless significance**; it somehow transcends the limitations and peculiarities of the age it was written in, and thereby speaks to what is constant in human nature

— Such writing is ‘not for an age, but for all time’: it is ‘news which stays news’

2. The second point is the logical consequence of the first. **The literary text contains its own meaning within itself**. It doesn’t require any elaborate process of placing it within a **context**, whether this be:

(a) **Socio—political** — the context of a particular social ‘background’ or political situation, or

(b) **Literary—historical** — whereby the work could be seen as the product of the literary influences of other writers, or as shaped by the conventions of particular genres, or

(c) **Autobiographical** — that is, as determined by the personal details of the author's life and thought

— Of course, as scholars, most academics would assert the value of studying these contexts, but as critics their adherence to the approach which insists upon the primacy and self-sufficiency of the 'words on the page' commits them to the process which has been called '**on-sight close reading**'

3. To understand the text well it must be detached from these contexts and studied in isolation. What is needed is the close verbal analysis of the text without prior ideological assumptions, or political pre-conditions, or, indeed, specific expectations of any kind, since all these are likely to interfere fatally with the true business of criticism, '**to see the object as in itself it really is**'

4. Human nature is essentially unchanging. The same passions, emotions, and even situations are seen again and again throughout human history. It follows that continuity in literature is more important and significant than innovation.

5. Individuality is something securely possessed within each of us as our unique 'essence'. This transcends our environmental influences, and though individuality can change and develop (as do characters in novels), it can't be transformed

- the belief that the individual ('the subject', now called the 'transcendent subject') is antecedent to, or transcends, the forces of society, experience, and language.

6. The purpose of literature is essentially the enhancement of life and the propagation of humane values; but not in a programmatic way: if literature, and criticism, become overtly and directly political they necessarily tend towards propaganda

7. Form and content in literature must be fused in an organic way, so that the one grows inevitably from the other. Literary form should not be like a decoration which is applied externally to a completed structure

8. This point about organic form applies above all to 'sincerity'. Sincerity (comprising truth-to-experience, honesty towards the self, and the capacity for human empathy and compassion) is a quality which resides within the language of literature

— It isn't a fact or an intention behind the work. Rather, sincerity is to be discovered within the text in such matters as the avoidance of cliché, or of over-inflated forms of expression

9. Again, the next idea follows from the previous one. What is valued in literature is the 'silent' showing and demonstrating of something, rather than the explaining, or saying, of it. Hence, ideas as such are worthless in literature until given the concrete embodiment of 'enactment'

— Thus, several of the explicit comments and formulations often cited in literary history contain specific denigrations of ideas as such and have a distinct anti-intellectual flavour to them

10. The job of criticism is to interpret the text, to mediate between it and the reader. A theoretical account of the nature of reading, or of literature in general, isn't useful in criticism, and will simply, if attempted, encumber critics with 'preconceived ideas' which will get between them and the text

— Perhaps in this phrase 'preconceived ideas' we get another glimpse into the nature of this pervasive distrust of ideas within liberal humanism, for there seems to be the notion that somehow all ideas are 'preconceived', in the sense that they will come between the reader and text if given half a chance

— There is, in fact, the clear mark here of what is called 'English empiricism', which can be defined as a determination to trust only what is made evident to the senses or experienced directly

The above list contains a series of propositions which I think many traditional critics would, on the whole, subscribe to, if they were in the habit of making their assumptions explicit. Together, ideas like these, and the literary practice which went with them, are now often referred to as 'liberal humanism'