

## Frank Kermode's Basic Ideas on Criticism

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Kermode's publications in nearly forty years as a literary critic reveal an extraordinary range of interests, including Renaissance and seventeenth-century poetry, modern poetry and fiction, theories of literature and criticism, and biblical poetics or exegesis. This makes him the most difficult of current critics to sum up. He has neither formed his own school nor committed himself to anyone else's—another thing that makes Kermode difficult to summarize or place. Keeping the difficulty in view, this paper is concerned with his basic ideas on literature and criticism, particularly in terms of his preoccupation with the inevitability of multiple interpretation of texts.

In *The Sense of an Ending* Kermode accepts the proposition that all human knowledge is by definition imaginative, that is, 'fictive,' or humanly constructed and inspired by our emotional needs. The fictions of Apocalypse are merely one kind of fiction, but they are crucial because only an imagined 'end' can give a definite shape to our conception of meaning and purpose. In *The Classic* he indicates that there are two kinds of classics: the older ones which had to be authorized, and the modern ones open to multiple interpretation because the modern world is so. In *The Genesis of Secrecy* he inquires into the art of interpretation by examining some mysterious passages and episodes in the gospels. His central subject is the problem of relative meanings involved in interpretation, and he shows how they are revealed and concealed.

In *Forms of Attention* Kermode asks the question of how works of art remain part of an accepted canon and, exploring examples of Botticelli's recovery of fame, shows that the force of relatively uninstructed opinion, rather than knowledge, are often decisive in canon-formation. His interest extends to socio-historical aspects of literary works, and he considers from various angles the problem of value in *History and Value*. The

Marxist way of dealing with this problem is critically examined. And he suggests that two ways of giving value to texts in historical context are period-formation like Renaissance or Baroque as well as canon-formation.

His attitude to theory underlying those books has always been suspicious or eclectic and pragmatic. He absorbs what seems useful to him and rejects what seems oversimplified or merely abstract. The basis of his thinking is of skeptical relativism, and it seems that he is, as a critic says, in 'the very best tradition of British empiricism.'