

Formalist Criticism:

Formalism and New Criticism “Formalism” is, as the name implies, an interpretive approach that emphasizes literary form and the study of literary devices within the text. The work of the Formalists had a general impact on later developments in “Structuralism” and other theories of narrative. “Formalism,” like “Structuralism,” sought to place the study of literature on a scientific basis through objective analysis of the motifs, devices, techniques, and other “functions” that comprise the literary work. The Formalists placed great importance on the literariness of texts, those qualities that distinguished the literary from other kinds of writing. Neither author nor context was essential for the Formalists; it was the narrative that spoke, the “hero-function,” for example, that had meaning. Form was the content. A plot device or narrative strategy was examined for how it functioned and compared to how it had functioned in other literary works. Of the Russian Formalist critics, Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky are probably the most well known.

The Formalist adage that the purpose of literature was “to make the stones stonier” nicely expresses their notion of literariness. “Formalism” is perhaps best known is Shklovsky’s concept of “defamiliarization.” The routine of ordinary experience, Shklovsky contended, rendered invisible the uniqueness and particularity of the objects of existence. Literary language, partly by calling attention to itself as language, estranged the reader from the familiar and made fresh the experience of daily life. The “New Criticism,” so designated as to indicate a break with traditional methods, was a product of the American university in the 1930s and 40s.

Though the New Criticism had its origins in Britain in the criticism of T. S. Eliot, the theory of I. A. Richards and the practice of William Empson, its most powerful impact has been in America. John Crowe Ransom, who published a book entitled *The New Criticism* in 1941, was the leading American

influence and he acknowledged a debt to Eliot and Richards. The other major American New Critics were Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren and W. K. Wimsatt. Indirectly related to the New Criticism are such important figures as Kenneth Burke and R. P. Blackmur. The early New Critics were politically conservative and their attitudes to literature were shaped by their opposition to certain twentieth-century tendencies of thought, such as Marxism.

“New Criticism” stressed close reading of the text itself, much like the French pedagogical precept “explication du texte.” As a strategy of reading, “New Criticism” viewed the work of literature as an aesthetic object independent of historical context and as a unified whole that reflected the unified sensibility of the artist. T.S. Eliot, though not explicitly associated with the movement, expressed a similar critical-aesthetic philosophy in his essays on John Donne and the metaphysical poets, writers who Eliot believed experienced a complete integration of thought and feeling. New Critics like Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren and W.K. Wimsatt placed a similar focus on the metaphysical poets and poetry in general, a genre well suited to New Critical practice.

“New Criticism” aimed at bringing a greater intellectual rigor to literary studies, confining itself to careful scrutiny of the text alone and the formal structures of paradox, ambiguity, irony, and metaphor, among others. “New Criticism” was fired by the conviction that their readings of poetry would yield a humanizing influence on readers and thus counter the alienating tendencies of modern, industrial life. “New Criticism” in this regard bears an affinity to the Southern Agrarian movement whose manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*, contained essays by two New Critics, Ransom and Warren. Perhaps the enduring legacy of “New Criticism” can be found in the college classroom, in which the verbal texture of the poem on the page remains a primary object of literary study.

1. Literature is a form of knowledge with intrinsic elements--style, structure, imagery, tone, and genre.
2. What gives a literary work status as art, or as a great work of art, is how all of its elements work together to create the reader's total *experience* (thought, feeling, gut reactions, etc.)
3. The appreciation of literature as an art requires close reading--a careful, step-by-step analysis and explication of the text (the language of the work). An analysis may follow from questions like, how do various elements work together to shape the effect on the reader?
4. Style and theme influence each other and can't be separated if meaning is to be retained. It's this interdependence in form and content that makes a text "literary." "Extracting" elements in isolation (theme, character, ploy, setting, etc.) may destroy a reader's aesthetic experience of the whole.
5. Formalist critics don't deny the historical, political situation of a work; they just believe works of art have the power to transcend by being "organic wholes"-akin to a being with a life of its own.
6. Formalist criticism is evaluative in that it differentiates great works of art from poor works of art. Other kinds of criticism don't necessarily concern themselves with this distinction.
7. Formalist criticism is decidedly a "scientific" approach to literary analysis, focusing on "facts amenable to "verification" (evidence in the text).
 - This approach regards literature as “a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms.” All the elements necessary for understanding the work are contained within the work itself. Of particular interest to the formalist critic are the elements of *form*—style, structure, tone, imagery, etc.—that are found within the text. A primary goal for formalist critics is to determine how such elements work together with the text’s content to shape its effects upon readers.

Intentional Fallacy

One of the critical concepts of New Criticism, “Intentional Fallacy” was formulated by Wimsatt and Beardsley in an essay in *The Verbal Icon* (1946) as the mistake of attempting to understand the author’s intentions when interpreting a literary work. Claiming that it is fallacious to base a critical judgement about the meaning or value of a literary work on “external evidences” concerning the author’s intention, Wimsatt and Beardsley held that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.” This is closely associated with the New Critical notion of the “autotelic text”, according to which the meaning of a work is contained solely within the work itself, and any attempt to understand the author’s intention violates the autonomy of the work. TS Eliot in “*Tradition and the Individual Talent*” (1919) had argued – that “Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation, are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry.” Stylistically as well as conceptually, Intentional Fallacy was against the Romantic conception of literature as a vehicle of personal expression. With the entry of structuralism and poststructuralism into the literary arena, literature began to be seen as a purely linguistic artefact, and intentional fallacy was strongly underscored with the Barthesian concept of the “death of the author”

Affective Fallacy

An important concept in New Criticism, coined by Wimsatt and Beardsley in an essay in *The Verbal Icon*, Affective Fallacy refers to the supposed error of judging or evaluating a text on the basis of its emotional effects on a reader. New Criticism represented a largely academic and scientific approach to literary studies and focused on the literary text itself as the object of study and not as a social artefact that expressed the inner life of the artist or the society in which it was written. Affective Fallacy is an answer to

impressionistic criticism, which argues that the reader's response to a poem is the ultimate indication of its value. For Wimsatt and Beardsley, the text was an autonomous entity, independent of both author and reader, and its merit and meaning was considered to be inherent and not attributed. Thus the reader's reaction to a text was discounted as a valid measure of the text, as what mattered was "what it is" and not "what it does".