

## **NEW CRITICISM**

New Criticism is an approach to literature, which was developed by a group of American critics, most of whom taught at southern universities during the years following the First World War. Like **Russian Formalism**, following Boris Eikhenbaum and Victor Shklovskii, the New Critics developed speculative positions and techniques of reading that provide a vital complement to the literary and artistic emergence of modernism. The New Critics wanted to avoid impressionistic criticism, which risked being shallow and arbitrary, and social/historical (Marxist) approaches, which might easily be subsumed by other disciplines. They were given their name by John Crowe Ransom, who describes the new American formalists in his book *The New Criticism* (1941). The movement took its first inspirations from TS Eliot and IA Richards' thoughts on criticism. The far-reaching influence of New Criticism stems less from theoretical positions than from the practical appeal of a characteristic way of reading. The theoretical differences among the critics commonly described as New Critics (**I. A. Richards**, **William Empson**, **F. R. Leavis**, **Kenneth Burke**, **John Crowe Ransom**, **Allen Tate**, **Yvor Winters**, **Cleanth Brooks**, **R. P. Blackmur**, **W. K. Wimsatt, Jr.**, **René Wellek**.) are sometimes so great as to leave little ground for agreement. For the New Critic, the province or object of the activity of criticism would be the text itself and not its historical context, not its author, and not its biographic history. These were specialized areas of inquiry "scholars" might worry about in the privacy of some graduate library. What the New Critics wanted to discuss was the part of a text that made us read it: its history, its sociology, its psychology, its author's intention and reader's private experience are irrelevant. **William Wimsatt** and **Monroe Beardsley** describe two other fallacies which are prominent in the study of literature. The **Intentional Fallacy** is the mistake of attempting to understand the author's intentions when interpreting a literary work. Such an approach is fallacious because the meaning of a work should be contained solely within the work itself, and attempts to understand the author's intention violate the autonomy of the work. The **Affective Fallacy** is the mistake of equating a work with its emotional effects upon an audience. The new critics believed that a text should not have to be understood relative to the responses of its readers; its merit (and meaning) must be inherent.

New Criticism argues that each text has a central unity. The responsibility of the reader is to discover this unity. The reader's job is to interpret the text, telling in what ways each of its parts contributes to the central unity. The primary interest is in themes. A text is spoken by a persona (narrator or speaker) who expresses an attitude which must be defined and who speaks in a tone which helps define the attitude: ironic, straightforward or ambiguous. Judgements of the value of a text are based on the closeness of the attitude to the examination of the balance of the text. The key phrases are irony, ambiguity, tone, complexity and paradox. The key phrases are irony, ambiguity, tone, complexity and paradox. or not they contribute to the central, unifying theme. The more complex the themes are and the more closely they contribute to a central theme (unity) the better the work.

Usually, the New Critics define their themes as oppositions: Life and death, good and evil, love and hate, harmony and strife, order and disorder, eternity and time, reality and appearance, truth and falsehood, emotion and reason, simplicity and complexity, nature and art. The analysis of a text is an exercise in showing how all of its parts contribute to a complex but single (unified) statement about human problems.

New Criticism is distinctly formalist in character and the method the reader must use is "close analysis." The reader must look at the words, the syntax, the structure (usually, "the argument"), the rhythm, the meter, the theme, the imagery, metaphor etc. The interpretation of a text shows that these aspects serve to support the structure of meaning within the text. The New Critic will ask the following types of questions while analyzing a piece.

How DOES a succession of images suggest a DIRECTION in a poem?

How DOES a METAPHOR link some words with a deeper set of ideas suggested in others?

How DO certain combinations of IMAGES, METAPHORS, and SYMBOLS create IRONY or TENSION among different figures in a poem?

And, ultimately, HOW do all these formal characteristics demonstrate the poem's SELF-SUFFICIENCY, or UNITY?

What makes language "poetry" for the New Critic might be a certain complexity of form. What makes it GREAT art would be its ability to exist in and of itself, to TRANSCEND its historical circumstances by supplying within itself all it needs to BE.

For a reader the words must be understood to be ambiguous (The more possible meanings a word has, the richer the ambiguity ).The reader should search out irony and paradox (contradictory meaning, hence also ambiguity). The reader must discover tensions in the work. These will be the results of thematic oppositions, though they may also occur as oppositions in imagery: light versus dark, beautiful versus ugly, graceful versus clumsy. The oppositions may also be in the words chosen: concrete versus abstract, energetic versus placid.

The reader must guard against two evils, stock responses (autumn should not make the reader sad unless the poem directs sadness at the thought of autumn) and idiosyncratic (affective) responses (Lush grass should not make the reader think of cows however often he or she has seen cows in lush grass unless the poem clearly directs the reader to associate cows and lush grass).

The aesthetic qualities praised by the New Critics were largely inherited from the critical writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge was the first to elaborate on a concept of the poem as a unified, organic whole, which reconciled its internal conflicts and achieved some final balance or harmony.

In *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), Cleanth Brooks integrates these considerations into the New Critical approach. In interpreting canonical works of poetry, Brooks

constantly analyzes the devices with which they set up opposing these and then resolve them. Through the use of "ironic contrast" and "ambivalence" , the poet is able to create internal paradoxes which are always resolved. Under close New Critical analysis, the poem is shown to be a hierarchical structure of meaning, of which one correct reading can be given.

Although the New Critics do not assert that the meaning of a poem is inconsequential, they reject approaches, which view the poem as an attempt at representing the "real world." They justify the avoidance of discussion of a poem's content through the doctrine of the "Heresy of Paraphrase," which is also described in *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Brooks asserts that the meaning of a poem is complex and precise, and that any attempt to paraphrase it inevitably distorts or reduces it. Thus, any attempt to say what a poem means is heretical, because it is an insult to the integrity of the complex structure of meaning within the work.

The New Critics privileged poetry over other forms of literary expression because they saw the poem as the purest exemplification of the literary values, which they upheld. However, the techniques of close reading and structural analysis of texts have also been applied to fiction, drama, and other literary forms. These techniques remain the dominant critical approach in many modern literature courses.

Because New Criticism is such a rigid and structured program for the study of literature, it is open to criticism on many fronts. First, in its insistence on excluding external evidence, New Criticism disqualifies many possibly fruitful perspectives for understanding texts, such as historicism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism. Since New Criticism aims at finding one "correct" reading, it also ignores the ambiguity of language and the active nature of the perception of meaning described by poststructuralists. Finally, it can even be perceived as elitist, because it excludes those readers who lack the background for arriving at the "correct" interpretation.

However, defenders of New Criticism might remind us that this approach is meant to deal with the poem on its own terms. While New Criticism may not offer us a wide range of perspectives on texts, it does attempt to deal with the text as a work of literary art and nothing else.