

Formalism or New Criticism

More than any other approach to literature, New Criticism—or Formalism—has influenced the way we study literature today. Its focus on the text rather than the author or the reader or the historical context was, at the time of its inception during the mid-point of the twentieth century, a new way of thinking about literature. To the New Critic, a focus on the author seemed illogical because the text itself encompassed the meaning—not what the author claimed the text was supposed to have meant. A focus on the reader made no sense either because idiosyncratic interpretations destabilized the text, which held the fixed meaning that all careful readers would discern. A focus on the historical period surrounding the text’s production was also irrelevant because it diminished the stature of the text as art, a carefully crafted expression that was to be appreciated for the aesthetic pleasures it afforded.

Other critical approaches that will occupy our attention in English 251 in later units are most often reactions to New Criticism. For example, Reader Response advocates attempt to legitimize the reader’s role in interpretation. They might argue, “No reader, no text!” Psychological approaches claim that an author’s frame of mind is important, as if the text itself becomes a writer’s dream recorded in literary language. And New Historicists, Feminists, and American Multi-culturalists believe that the ways literature represents particular historical moments and world views are most important to interpretation. Approaches like these all regard New Criticism as too narrow.

Even though New Criticism has passed from vogue in many respects, it nonetheless leaves students of literature an important legacy: because of its emphasis on the text itself, all critical theories have inherited the practice of “close reading”—in other words, an emphasis on the interplay of formal literary elements (for example, diction, imagery, figurative language, irony). The analysis of these “formal” elements in relationship to a text’s themes, by the way, is where New Criticism gets its nickname, “Formalism.” (We’ll look at those formal elements in a moment.)

Former BYU English Professor David L. Cowles presents a clever analogy that frames an important tenet of New Criticism—that the text is the rightful focus of the reader. Cowles begins:

Compare the literary world to a chocolate chip cookie. Suppose that Elizabeth Crocker, New Cookie Critic, samples a chocolate chip cookie at a party. The cookie, like a literary work, offers a unique pleasure to the person who eats it. From the first bite, Elizabeth will want to understand why the cookie tastes the way it does. She will feel an irresistible desire to know what makes it this particular cookie and not something else. So she will analyze the cookie using a proven formula.

Elizabeth will be especially anxious to discover what ingredients went into the cookie, in what proportions, and in what combinations. She may even want to know what brands were used. Then she will carefully examine the ingredients separately and in groups to see how they contribute to the whole cookie’s “form.” She may try

to distinguish this particular cookie's form from that of other cookies. When she has finished her analysis, Elizabeth can enjoy the cookie satisfied that she understands exactly what she is eating and why it gives her pleasure.

The New Critic baker will quite pointedly not care about several other factors. Elizabeth's only concern is the cookie itself. So she won't worry about its history—the development of the cookie as a culinary art form, its use in ancient Mesopotamian fertility rituals, or the manufacture of the particular chocolate chips used. She won't concern herself with the cook's personal life, either. The baker's family, economic situation, religious orientation, or political preferences will all seem irrelevant.

Elizabeth isn't even interested in the potential uses of her cookie—in social situations, by members of particular economic classes, in church bazaars, as a bribe for children, at state functions. She doesn't care when the cookie is served in relation to entrees or whether it's usually made by men or women. And she won't take a poll to decide how many people like chocolate chip cookies better than oatmeal cookies.

Elizabeth's concern is one particular cookie and how all of its ingredients add up to a whole, unique product.

Cowles' analogy makes some sense. When we eat a chocolate chip cookie, we're focused on the pleasure of eating the cookie—the sweetness, the gooey chocolate, the crunch. And if we really like a particular cookie, we may ask for a recipe and examine ways particular ingredients vary from recipe to recipe: –more flour? –less butter? –Nestle or Hershey chips? Perhaps in a rare pensive mood, we might wonder about the history of the chocolate chips or the political affiliation of the cook, but these questions seem far removed from the delight of eating cookies.

To take Cowles' analogy to its logical conclusion, New Critics think of literary texts as we might think of cookies. The text is to be enjoyed for its own sake and on its own terms—what it actually is, not who made it, or where or when it was made. Like the cookie, the text comes to have an identity of its own, comprised of elements (ingredients) in different amounts and arrangements, all of which are carefully crafted to create for the reader a pleasurable experience.

The fun of analysis for the New Critic is the challenge of figuring out what elements make up the text and in what configurations. For example, when analyzing a poem, you might ask, How do images or sounds or metrical patterns contribute to the poem's idea. In the process of analysis, the New Critic never loses sight of the text itself—**the text is everything!**

For the Formalist then the study of literature is not the study of biography, literary history, logic, ethics, psychology, the feminist movement, economics, or politics: **Literature is the study of a text as an artistic expression.**

As mentioned above, the nickname for New Criticism is Formalism, a term derived from the formal elements that describe poetry, fiction, and drama.

The important concept to understand is that New Critics analyze literary texts to show how these formal elements ultimately create—even become—the meaning of the literary work. For a New Critic, how a writer says something is as important as what the writer is saying.

Changing a text’s form or a writer’s manner of expression necessarily changes the idea—the meaning or the theme that the author is writing about.

Becoming adept at Formalist analysis—that is, exploring the configuration of formal elements within a literary work to discover how they contribute to the meaning of that text—assumes that a reader is (1) committed to “close reading” and (2) familiar with the formal elements that describe the genre at hand—fiction, poetry, drama.