

# LITERARY THEORY

## FORMALISM AND NEW CRITICISM

### Definition and Description:

Formalism and New Criticism are often defined as a close reading to the text. What a New Criticism theorists want to do, in relations to reading closely, is to look at specific elements that create a unity in a text. One of the major ideas associated with New Criticism is that of organic unity—in other words, how all parts of the work affect each other and how they fit together.

Critics associated with Formalism and New Criticism will look at the form of the work, both internally and externally. They will focus on what is inside the text; the meaning the text produces from within itself. They will also focus on language and how language is used to create meaning. They will pay close attention to words that create tension, that are ambiguous, that might imply another, or even deeper, meaning than what a reader gets from a single read through.

What wouldn't appear in Formalism or New Criticism would be the fallacies that often occur (Intentional and affective), paraphrasing, and/or biographical information of the author.

### Key People:

- Monroe Beardsley
- R.P. Blackmur
- Cleanth Brooks
- T. S. Eliot
- William Empson
- F. R. Leavis
- John Crowe Ransom
- A. Richards
- Robert Penn Warren
- William K. Wimsatt

### Websites:

- <http://www.lawrence.edu/dept/english/courses/60A/newcrit.html>
- <http://www.ipl.org/ref/litcrit>
- <http://litguide.press.jhu.edu>
- <http://www.sou.edu/english/hedges/sodashop/rcenter/theory/explained/ncritexp.htm>
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Critics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Critics)
- <http://www.cnr.edu/home/bmcmamus/tools.html>

### Questions:

#### (Form)

- What is the effect of the whole?
- How do the parts of the poem come together to assume a unique shape that presents readers with a unique experience?
- Does this work follow a traditional form, or does it chart its own development?
- How are the events of the plot recounted?
- How does the work's organization affect its meaning?
- Does the denouement in a plot surprise or satisfy you? Does it provide closure to the narrative or leave it open?
- What is the effect of using a particular meter?
- What is the effect of telling a story from this point of view?
- What sounds are important in developing this piece? Where do they recur?
- What rhythms are in the words?
- Where do images foreshadow later events?
- How does the narrator's point of view shape the meaning?
- What visual patterns are in this text?
- What progressions of nature are used to suggest meaning (i.e. sunrise/sunset)?
- If you were to make a chart of the progress of this plot of poem, what would it look like?

#### (Diction)

- Do the words used multiple times change meaning with each subsequent use? Do they grow more powerful?
- Where did you find ambiguity? How does it suggest additional meanings?
- What are the important symbols? How do they create unity?

#### (Unity)

- Where do several images work together to create meaning?
- What is paradoxical in the work? How is it both contradictory and true?
- What is ironic in the work?
- Do all of the elements cohere in ways that generate meaning?

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- Are the verbal motifs, images, figures of speech, symbols, meter, rhyme, and sound consistent? If not, what did you have to reconcile?
- What is the meaning of the title? What's its relationship to the rest of the poem?

### (General)

- What does [this word] mean?
- What words connote [this]?
- How are these words related to [blank] in the poem/story?
- Is [this word] an allusion?
- What relationships are established between words or concepts in the text?
- What tension is created?
- What words, if any, need to be defined?
- What words and their etymological roots need to be scrutinized?
- What are the various connotative meanings words in the text may have? Do these various shades of meaning help establish relationships or patterns in the text?
- What allusions, if any, are found in the text?
- What symbols, images, and figures of speech are used? What is the relationship between any symbol or image? Between an image and another image?
- What elements of prosody (rhyme, meter, and stanza patterns) can you note and discuss?
- What is the tone of the work?
- What tensions, ambiguities, or paradoxes arise within the text?
- How do we see things? How do our eyes move across the scene? What do we see first, what next?
- What did the Author do by so arranging those words? How did the author "achieve" this accomplishment?
- What single interpretation of the text best establishes its organic unity? How do the text's formal elements, and the multiple meanings those elements produce, all work together to support the theme, or overall meaning, of the work?

### Key Terms

- **Affective fallacy:** work judged based on emotional effect of audience
- **Allusion:** a brief reference to an work in which it is made like history, mythology, or other works of literature
- **Ambiguity:** Wording that suggests more than one meaning or interpretation
- **Connotation(ive):** Meaning associated with a word; implied meaning
- **Denotation(ive):** The core or specific meaning of a word without any associated or suggested meanings; dictionary meaning
- **Dénouement:** The part where everything falls together; the falling moment
- **Etymology:** The study of the origins of words
- **Figurative language:** more than, or other than, literal meaning (i.e. image, symbol, metaphor, simile)
- **Form:** organization of material for the creation of the total effect
- **Image:** reference to an object perceived by the senses (i.e. colors, shapes, lighting, etc)
- **Intentional fallacy:** leaning towards an author's intentions
- **Irony:** A statement or situation in which the meaning is the opposite of what is said, done or expected
- **Metaphor:** figurative meaning, comparison of two dissimilar objects
- **Motif:** a recurring phrase, image, scene in a work
- **Organic form/unity:** objects within are organisms that interact with each other in a larger organic universe; create a sense of wholeness
- **Paradox:** a statement that seems to contradict itself but is actually true.
- **Point of view:** the perspective from which a narrative is told
- **Simile:** A metaphor that uses like or as to compare
- **Structure:** the statement made by a work; the essential, basic meaning
- **Symbol:** a literal presence but also represents something beyond the self; a reference to something abstract
- **Tension:** linking together of opposites and their resolution creating complexity (multiple and conflicting meanings which comes from a paradox, irony, ambiguities, and tensions)
- **Texture:** consistency of imagery