

New Criticism

New Criticism was a formalist movement in literary theory that dominated American literary criticism in the middle decades of the 20th century. It emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. The movement derived its name from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*.

The work of English scholar I. A. Richards, especially his *Practical Criticism* and *The Meaning of Meaning*, which offered what was claimed to be an empirical scientific approach, were important to the development of New Critical methodology.^[1] Also very influential were the critical essays of T. S. Eliot, such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Hamlet and His Problems", in which Eliot developed his notion of the "objective correlative". Eliot's evaluative judgments, such as his condemnation of Milton and Shelley, his liking for the so-called metaphysical poets and his insistence that poetry must be impersonal, greatly influenced the formation of the New Critical canon.

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New Criticism developed as a reaction to the older philological and literary history schools of the US North, which, influenced by nineteenth-century German scholarship, focused on the history and meaning of individual words and their relation to foreign and ancient languages, comparative sources, and the biographical circumstances of the authors. These approaches, it was felt, tended to distract from the text and meaning of a poem and entirely neglect its aesthetic qualities in favor of teaching about external factors. On the other hand, the literary appreciation school, which limited itself to pointing out the "beauties" and morally elevating qualities of the text, was disparaged by the New Critics as too subjective and emotional. Condemning this as a version of Romanticism, they aimed for newer, systematic and objective method.^[2]

It was felt, especially by creative writers and by literary critics outside the academy, that the special aesthetic experience of poetry and literary language was lost in the welter of extraneous erudition and emotional effusions. Heather Dubrow notes that the prevailing focus of literary scholarship was on "the study of ethical values and philosophical issues through literature, the tracing of literary history, and ... political criticism". Literature was approached and literary scholarship did not focus on analysis of texts.^[3]

New Critics believed the structure and meaning of the text were intimately connected and should not be analyzed separately. In order to bring the focus of literary studies back to analysis of the texts, they aimed to exclude the reader's response, the author's intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias from their analysis. These goals were articulated in Ransom's "Criticism, Inc." and Allen Tate's "Miss Emily and the Bibliographers".

Close reading (or *explication de texte*) was a staple of French literary studies, but in the United States, aesthetic concerns, and the study of modern poets was the province of non-academic essayists and book reviewers rather than serious scholars. The New Criticism changed this. Though their interest in textual study initially met with resistance from older scholars, the methods of the New Critics rapidly predominated in American universities until challenged by Feminism and structuralism in the 1970s. Other schools of critical theory, including, post-structuralism, and deconstructionist theory, the New Historicism, and Receptions studies followed.

Although the New Critics were never a formal group, an important inspiration was the teaching of John Crowe Ransom of Vanderbilt University, whose students (all Southerners), Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren would go on to develop the aesthetics that came to be known as the New Criticism. Indeed, for Paul Lauter, a Professor of American Studies at Trinity College, New Criticism is a reemergence of the Southern Agrarians.^[4] In his essay, "The New Criticism", Cleanth Brooks notes that "The New Critic, like the Snark, is a very elusive beast", meaning that there was no clearly defined "New Critical" manifesto, school, or stance.^[5] Nevertheless, a number of writings outline inter-related New Critical ideas.

In 1946, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley published a classic and controversial New Critical essay entitled "The Intentional Fallacy", in which they argued strongly against the relevance of an author's intention, or "intended meaning" in the analysis of a literary work. For Wimsatt and Beardsley, the words on the page were all that mattered; importation of meanings from outside the text was considered irrelevant, and potentially distracting.

In another essay, "The Affective Fallacy", which served as a kind of sister essay to "The Intentional Fallacy" Wimsatt and Beardsley also discounted the reader's personal/emotional reaction to a literary work as a valid means of analyzing a text. This fallacy would later be repudiated by theorists from the reader-response school of literary theory. One of the leading theorists from this school, Stanley Fish, was himself trained by New Critics. Fish criticizes Wimsatt and Beardsley in his essay "Literature in the Reader" (1970).^[6]

The hey-day of the New Criticism in American high schools and colleges was the Cold War decades between 1950 and the mid-seventies. Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction* both became staples during this era.

Studying a passage of prose or poetry in New Critical style required careful, exacting scrutiny of the passage itself. Formal elements such as rhyme, meter, setting, characterization, and plot were used to identify the theme of the text. In addition to the theme, the New Critics also looked for paradox, ambiguity, irony, and tension to help establish the single best and most unified interpretation of the text.

Although the New Criticism is no longer a dominant theoretical model in American universities, some of its methods (like close reading) are still fundamental tools of literary criticism, underpinning a number of subsequent theoretic approaches to literature including poststructuralism, deconstruction theory, and reader-response theory.

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It was frequently alleged that the New Criticism treated literary texts as autonomous and divorced from historical context, and that its practitioners were "uninterested in the human meaning, the social function and effect of literature."^[7]^[8]

Indicative of the reader-response school of theory, Terence Hawkes writes that the fundamental close reading technique is based on the assumption that "the subject and the object of study—the reader and the text—are stable and independent forms, rather than products of the unconscious process of signification," an assumption which he identifies as the "ideology of liberal humanism," which is attributed to the New Critics who are "accused of attempting to disguise the interests at work in their critical processes."^[8] For Hawkes, ideally, a critic ought to be considered to "[create] the finished work by his reading of it, and [not to] remain simply an inert consumer of a 'ready-made' product."^[8]

In response to critics like Hawkes, Cleanth Brooks, in his essay "The New Criticism" (1979), argued that the New Criticism was not diametrically opposed to the general principles of reader-response theory and that the two could complement one another. For instance, he stated, "If some of the New Critics have preferred to stress the writing rather than the writer, so have they given less stress to the reader—to the reader's response to the work. Yet no one in his right mind could forget the reader. He is essential for 'realizing' any poem or novel. . . Reader response is certainly worth studying." However, Brooks tempers his praise for the reader-response theory by noting its limitations, pointing out that, "to put meaning and valuation of a literary work at the mercy of any and every individual [reader] would reduce the study of literature to reader psychology and to the history of taste."^[9]

Another objection to the New Criticism is that it is thought to aim at making criticism scientific, or at least "bringing literary study to a condition rivaling that of science."^[7] René Wellek, however, points out the erroneous nature of this criticism by noting that a number of the New Critics outlined their theoretical aesthetics in stark contrast to the "objectivity" of the sciences (although Ransom, in his essay "Criticism, Inc." did advocate that "criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic").^[7]^[10]

At times, Wellek defended the New Critics in his essay "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra" (1978).

Important texts

- T.S. Eliot's essays "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Hamlet and His Problems"
- Ransom's essays "Criticism, Inc" and "The Ontological Critic"
- Tate's essay "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer"
- Wimsatt and Beardsley's essays "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy"
- Brooks' book *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*
- Warren's essay "Pure and Impure Poetry"
- Wellek and Warren's book *Theory of Literature*

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