

Lecture 2: Formalism

Definition:

Formalism is a literary theory that emphasizes the structure, form, and stylistic elements of a text rather than its historical, social, or biographical context. It focuses on how meaning is created through language, literary devices, and narrative techniques.

1. Origins and Key Thinkers

Formalism emerged in the early 20th century, primarily in Russia, through the work of the **Russian Formalists**, and later in the West through **New Criticism**.

- **Russian Formalists (1910s–1930s)**
 - Key Figures: Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Boris Eikhenbaum
 - Emphasized *literariness*—what makes a text a literary work rather than ordinary language
 - Introduced concepts like *defamiliarization* and *fabula vs. syuzhet*
 - **New Criticism (1940s–1960s, USA & UK)**
 - Key Figures: Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, W.K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley
 - Promoted *close reading*—analyzing a text's structure, imagery, symbols, and themes without considering external influences
 - Introduced concepts like *the intentional fallacy* (the idea that an author's intent is irrelevant) and *the affective fallacy* (the belief that a reader's emotional response should not determine a text's meaning)
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2. Core Principles of Formalism

1. Autonomy of the Text

- A literary work should be analyzed as an independent entity, separate from its historical or biographical context.
- Example: A Formalist reading of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* would focus on its metaphors, rhythm, and structure rather than Shakespeare's personal life.

2. Defamiliarization (Ostranenie)

- Introduced by Viktor Shklovsky, this concept describes how literature makes the familiar seem strange, forcing readers to perceive things in a new way.
- Example: Tolstoy's *Kholstomer* (a story told from a horse's perspective) defamiliarizes human behavior, making readers rethink social norms.

3. Form and Function

- A text's meaning is derived from its structure, including plot, narrative techniques, and use of literary devices.
- Example: In poetry, Formalists analyze rhyme schemes, meter, and imagery rather than the poet's emotions or historical background.

4. Fabula vs. Syuzhet (Story vs. Plot)

- Roman Jakobson and Boris Tomashevsky distinguished between:
 - *Fabula* (raw events of the story)
 - *Syuzhet* (how the events are arranged in the narrative)
- Example: In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky presents events out of chronological order, creating suspense and psychological depth.

3. Applications of Formalism in Literary Analysis

• Poetry Analysis

- Formalists analyze rhyme, meter, and figurative language.

- Example: In Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*, a Formalist would focus on how alliteration and imagery create a dreamlike atmosphere.
 - **Prose and Narrative Studies**
 - Formalists examine how storytelling techniques shape meaning.
 - Example: In *Pride and Prejudice*, a Formalist might study irony and free indirect discourse rather than Austen's views on marriage.
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4. Criticism and Limitations

- **Ignores Historical and Social Context**
 - Critics argue that Formalism overlooks a text's political, cultural, and ideological influences.
 - Example: A purely Formalist reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would ignore its role in anti-slavery activism.
 - **Too Rigid and Technical**
 - Some scholars believe Formalism reduces literature to a mechanical analysis of structures and patterns, neglecting the reader's personal engagement.
 - **Limited Scope**
 - Formalism works well for poetry and structured narratives but struggles with texts that rely on external references (e.g., postcolonial literature).
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5. Influence on Later Theories

Despite its limitations, Formalism laid the groundwork for later critical approaches:

- **Structuralism** (Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss) built on Formalist ideas but examined literature as part of a larger system of signs.

- **Narratology** (Gérard Genette) refined the study of narrative structures.
 - **Deconstruction** (Jacques Derrida) critiqued the rigid binary distinctions in Formalism.
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Conclusion

Formalism remains a foundational approach in literary studies, emphasizing the intrinsic qualities of a text. While it has been critiqued for ignoring historical and social dimensions, its methods—such as close reading and attention to form—continue to influence literary criticism today.