

Lecture 3 : New Criticism

New Criticism is a literary theory that developed in the early 20th century, particularly in the United States and England. It emphasizes close reading and detailed textual analysis while rejecting external influences like historical context, authorial intent, or reader response.

1. Historical Background

New Criticism emerged in reaction to earlier literary approaches that emphasized history, biography, and moral interpretations. It gained prominence in the 1920s and 1930s and dominated literary studies in the mid-20th century before being challenged by later theories like Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, and Reader-Response criticism.

Key moments in its development:

- **Early influences:** The ideas of **T.S. Eliot** and **I.A. Richards** on literary analysis helped shape New Criticism.
 - **The rise of formalist criticism:** The movement was named after **John Crowe Ransom's** book *The New Criticism* (1941).
 - **Dominance in academia:** By the 1940s and 1950s, New Criticism became the standard method for literary analysis in American universities.
-

2. Core Principles of New Criticism

New Criticism is based on the idea that literary texts are **self-contained, autonomous objects** that should be analyzed based solely on their internal elements.

A. Close Reading

- A detailed examination of a text's structure, form, and language.
- Focus on elements like irony, paradox, imagery, and symbolism.

B. The Text as an Independent Entity

- Literature should not be analyzed through the author's biography, historical context, or reader's emotions.

- Meaning comes from the text itself, not external influences.

C. The "Heresy of Paraphrase"

- Meaning in poetry or literature cannot be fully captured by paraphrasing.
- The form and structure are inseparable from the meaning.

D. The Intentional Fallacy (W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley)

- A literary work should not be judged based on the author's intended meaning.
- The text stands alone, independent of the author's personal intentions.

E. The Affective Fallacy (Wimsatt and Beardsley)

- A text's meaning is not determined by the emotions it produces in the reader.
- Reader response is subjective and should not be the basis for literary interpretation.

3. Key Figures and Their Contributions

1. **John Crowe Ransom** – *The New Criticism* (1941)
 - Gave the movement its name.
 - Advocated for a rigorous, objective analysis of literary texts.
2. **Cleanth Brooks** – *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947)
 - Argued that poetry's meaning is found in its structure and use of literary devices.
 - Highlighted the role of irony and paradox in poetry.
3. **Robert Penn Warren**
 - Co-authored *Understanding Poetry* (1938) with Brooks, which became a foundational textbook for New Criticism.
4. **W.K. Wimsatt & Monroe Beardsley**
 - Introduced the concepts of **intentional fallacy** and **affective fallacy**.
5. **I.A. Richards** – *Practical Criticism* (1929)
 - Introduced detailed close reading techniques.
6. **T.S. Eliot**
 - Though not a formal New Critic, his essays on literature influenced the movement.

- Argued that poetry should be analyzed based on structure rather than authorial intent.
-

4. Methodology: How to Apply New Criticism

When analyzing a text using New Criticism, follow these steps:

- 1. Close Reading**
 - Focus on the text itself without external references.
 - Look at diction, syntax, tone, and figurative language.
 - 2. Examine Literary Devices**
 - Identify irony, paradox, symbolism, imagery, and metaphor.
 - Ask how these elements contribute to the text's unity and meaning.
 - 3. Analyze Structure and Form**
 - Consider how the form (rhyme, meter, stanza structure) reinforces the content.
 - Avoid summarizing; instead, analyze how the text works as a whole.
 - 4. Avoid External Context**
 - Do not bring in the author's biography, historical background, or personal interpretations.
 - Stick to what the text reveals within itself.
-

5. Strengths of New Criticism

- ✓ **Encourages close reading** – Helps readers develop attention to detail.
 - ✓ **Focuses on the text itself** – Avoids speculation about the author's intentions.
 - ✓ **Promotes objective analysis** – Provides a structured approach to literary study.
 - ✓ **Enhances appreciation of literary craft** – Highlights the importance of form and language.
-

6. Criticism and Decline of New Criticism

Despite its impact, New Criticism faced several criticisms:

- ✗ **Ignores historical and cultural context** – Literature does not exist in isolation from society.
- ✗ **Rejects reader interpretation** – Reader-Response critics argue that meaning is created through reading, not just within the text.
- ✗ **Overlooks authorial intent** – Some argue that knowing an author's background can enrich understanding.
- ✗ **Inflexible approach** – Later theories like Structuralism, Deconstruction, and Postcolonial Criticism challenge its rigidity.

By the 1960s, New Criticism began to lose dominance as **Post-Structuralism, Reader-Response Criticism, and Cultural Studies** emerged.

7. New Criticism's Lasting Influence

Despite its decline, New Criticism continues to influence literary studies:

- **Close reading is still a fundamental skill in literary analysis.**
 - **Many academic programs incorporate New Critical techniques.**
 - **Its emphasis on textual analysis shaped modern literary criticism.**
-

Conclusion

New Criticism revolutionized literary studies by emphasizing close reading and textual analysis. While its exclusion of external factors has been challenged, its methods continue to shape literary criticism today. It remains a valuable approach for understanding how literary works function **as self-contained artistic expressions.**