

Introduction to New Criticism and Some Practitioners

Introduction

New criticism, also known as Textual Criticism is considered one of the most influential critical literary theories of the twentieth century. It is supposed to be a specifically American movement. The term "New Criticism" was first used by Joel E. Spingarn in an address at Columbia University on "The New Criticism" and this address may be regarded the manifesto of the movement. The term "New Criticism" came into use in literature after John Crowe Ransom, the American critic published his book *The New Criticism*, in 1941.

In *The New Criticism*, Ransom analyses the three contemporary critics, T.S.Eliot, I.A.Richards and Yvor Winters and makes a powerful appeal for Ontological criticism. For Ransom, Ontological criticism informs the essence to find the *being* of the text or poem. Ontological Criticism is based on the ontology of the text. The belief is that the text has its own ontology, that is its own existence.

From the mid-1930's to the late 1950's, New Criticism occupied the centre-stage of literary criticism because of the novelty of its critical practice. New Criticism is noted for providing a new direction in criticism than expressing novel ideas. The insistence on the objectivity of a text, its self-sufficiency and organic unity ushered a unique way to read the text. The New Critics regard the poem to be an autonomous object that is examined on its own terms. The New Critics frequently use the term "poem" casually to refer to any artistic expression and the term "poet" would pertain to all literary artists.

T.E.Hulme, Ezra Pound, T.S.Eliot, I.A.Richards, William Empson and F.R.Leavis are considered the precursors of New Criticism. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the preceding and existing schools of criticism. Under their influence, literary criticism became more a science than an art because of the development of new ideologies of psychology, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, economics and politics. These ideologies made an impact on the methods of critical approach and widened the scope of analyses. John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R.P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, William Empson, René Wellek, and W.K.Wimsatt to mention a few are the prominent New Critics who represent this movement in literary criticism.

Reasons for the Rise of New Criticism

- There was widespread dissatisfaction both in England and America with the contemporary critical methods in literature. Though there was rapid scientific progress and social change, literature and literary criticism was stagnant.
- Concerns with moral and social values came to be regarded obstacles in the way of literary and critical developments. There was dissatisfaction with the academic importance accorded to the author rather than to the work.
- The Imagist school had a profound influence on New Criticism. T.E.Hulme's *Speculations* is regarded one of the most important prose documents that ushered the rise of New Criticism. In this work, Hulme argued that the poet's main concern

must be with his craft. Images in poetry are not mere decoration, but the very essence of it. Poetry has organic complexity, and the whole cannot be understood without understanding the parts. Ezra Pound emphasised the formalistic study of poetry. He emphasised that American poets must look at poetry as an art whose techniques are subject to changes.

- The attempt to use literature as a tool to propagate Marxist ideology gave rise to a reaction against moral and social preoccupation of the literary critics and thus contributed to the popularity of the aims and ideals of New Criticism.
- The ethical emphasis of the New Humanists contributed to the New Critics' opposition to didacticism.

The Basic Tenets of New Criticism

- The New Critics regard a poem or a work of art as “the thing in itself” and the critic must concentrate on the work. The function of the critic is to analyse, interpret and evaluate a work of art. The critic must engage in close textual study without considering any extraneous factors.
- Moral and religious concerns, social and political conditions, and the biography of the poet are irrelevant. These details are obstacles to comprehend a work of art. The literary critic must divert from extrinsic bias and prejudice, and approach the work with an open mind to study the work of art “as it is in itself.”
- The critic must not be hindered and prejudiced by any other literary theories.
- A poem has both form and content and both should be closely studied and analysed before proper understanding of the true meaning of the poem.
- Words, images, rhythm and meter constitute the form of poetry and they have to be closely studied. A poem is an organic whole and the different parts are interconnected to each other with each part influencing the other.
- The study of words, their arrangement and the ways in which they operate on each other are important. Words assume denotative and connotative import. Therefore, only close analyses of the words can bring out the meaning of a poem in its entirety.
- I. A. Richards' concept of “behaviour” of words, Empson's seven categories of “ambiguity” with their subdivisions; John Crowe Ransom's principle of “texture”; Robert Penn Warren's preoccupation with “symbols”; and Allen Tate's theory of “tension” are related to the search for meaning of words because the words undergo transformation when they contribute to the meaning and structure of a poem.
- Poetry is communication, and language is a means of communication so the New Critic seeks to understand the full meaning of the poem through a study of poetic language. For the New Critics, words are important and close analyses of words is the only key to the poetic meaning of the poem.
- The New Critics are opposed to historical and comparative methods of criticism. Historical considerations are extraneous factors that dampen the work of literature. The comparison of works of art requires analyses of the objectives of the writers, their methods and techniques, which are obviously bound to be different. Comparative analysis would call for a cautious approach to address such discrepancies.

- The New Critics are anti-Impressionistic, and anti-Romantic. They insist that instead of providing impressions, which are bound to be vague and subjective, the critic must make a close, objective and precise study of the poem concerned. They reject Positivist Criticism.

Positivist Criticism

In literary criticism, Positivism is encapsulated in the French scholar Hippolyte Taine's (1828- 1893) famous slogan of "race, *milieu*, and moment." Taine ascertains that the literary text should be regarded as the expression of the psychology of an individual. This means that the period in which the individual lived and the race to which he belonged would also be involved and all human achievements could be explained by referring to these three causes. Literary criticism was devoted to the underlying explanation of texts.

In relation to these three factors, critics paid attention to the author's life, his immediate social and cultural environment, and any previous comments he would have made about the reasons for writing. Research was directed towards the minute details of the writer's life and not the features of the literary text, except from a historical point of view. Critics disregarded questions concerning the value or the distinctive properties of literature, since these could not be dealt in a factual or historical manner. Twentieth century criticism reacts against this extrinsic approach to literature and the attention shifts from the author to the text and the reader.

In literature, the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857), in his book *Cours de Philosophie Positive* mentions the philosophy of positivism. The principal aim of this philosophy was to extend the methods and principles of natural science to the humanities. The positivist philosopher worked with discernible facts rather than ideas.

Some New Critics: A Brief Summary

I.A.Richards (1893- 1979)

A pioneer of twentieth century criticism, Richards shares Eliot's practical criticism. However, he differed in aim and method from Eliot. His criticism puts emphasis on the scientific explanation of poetry and the close study of the text. He says that there are two uses of language – scientific and emotive. Scientific language is used for reference and the emotive language is used for the expression of emotions and attitudes. Scientific language refers to the denotative meaning, and emotive language, which is the connotative meaning. Richards believes that a poem is unique and its personality can be best appreciated by the proper evaluation of the words used in it.

F.R. Leavis (1895-1978)

Leavis is a critic who follows the critical principles declared by T.S.Eliot and I.A.Richards. He asserts that the fundamental requirement of a critic is the need for practising practical criticism. His work is noted for its validity of thought, intelligence and concreteness. He recognises the value of literature of life. He is of the opinion that a real literary interest is marked by an interest in man, society and civilisation. To him, a critic's vocation extends beyond the analysis of a work of art to its social context. He started the literary quarterly *Scrutiny* in 1932, till it ceased publication in 1953. Some of his important publications on literature and culture are *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932),

Revaluation (1936), *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (1948), *D.H.Lawrence: Novelist* (1955), and *Dickens the Novelist* (1970).

John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974)

Noted critic, poet, teacher and editor, Ransom is the founder editor of the *Kenyon Review*, one of the most successful literary journals of the time. His first important book is *The World's Body* (1938), where there is evidence of poetry taking on some of the tasks performed by religion in the previous ages. In *The New Criticism* (1941), he discusses the contribution of I.A.Richards, T. S.Eliot and Yvor Winters, who are the pioneers of New Criticism. His important critical essays are "Criticism Inc." published in *Virginia Quarterly Review* in 1937; "Poetry: A Note on Ontology"; and "Criticism as Pure Speculation".

His concern with poetic structure and texture, close textual reading, autonomy of art has a bearing on the New Critics. His "structure texture" theory of poetry is different from Brooks' concept of "paradox" and "irony" or Allen Tate's theory of "tension". He wrote in defense of his own poetic craft. His poems were born of sound and meaning; the tension between sound and sense. He uses ontology as a synonym for any concern with actual reality. The function of poetry, in his opinion is to celebrate the concrete not the abstract. He disagrees with the expression of the personality of the poet in his verse.

Cleanth Brooks (1906- 1994)

A New Critic known for the collection of critical essays, *Modern Poetry and Tradition* (1939) and *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947), Brooks made an impact on the critics of the time because of his critical pronouncements that were relevant to explaining suggestiveness in poetry. *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957) was written in collaboration with Wimsatt. His influential essay "Irony as a Principle of Structure" lays stress on the importance of metaphor. He believes in "a principle of indirection". He asserts that statements and images in a poem are in an organic relationship, with one part qualifying and adding meaning to the other. The other significant essays by him are "The Language of Paradox", "The Formalist Critic", and "The Heresy of Paraphrase". His book *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963) is the best of his later works.

William K. Wimsatt (1907-1945)

Wimsatt was professor at Yale, where he had been teaching since 1939. His first important book *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson* was published in 1941. *The Verbal Icon-Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954) and *Hateful Contraries: Studies in Literature and Criticism* (1965) bring together some of the articles which appeared in journals. In *The Portraits of Alexander Pope* (1965), Wimsatt examines the complex relationship between Alexander Pope and his painters. In collaboration with his friend Monroe C. Beardsley, he wrote the essays "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy", which recapitulate one of the basic precepts of the New Critics, which is objectivity of critical activity.

Allen Tate (1879-1979)

Tate declares that poetry is not the instrument for conveying indistinct feeling but an autonomous structure, that is an organised whole in itself. A poem has integrity; it is a

whole, in which the parts collaborate and modify each other. He says that a poem is not an activity like a ceremonial preaching. He believes in the social relevance of poetry. According to Tate, a poem provides “special, unique and complete knowledge” of the world. The knowledge provided by poetry is superior to scientific or historical documents. He says that poetry is expressed through “tension”, a term he formulated by “lopping the prefixes off the logical terms extension and intension.”

Yvor Winters (1900-1968)

Winters rejects modernist innovations and turns to the conventional prosody found in John Dryden and Alexander Pope. He believes that poetry is “a statement in words about a human experience.” He believes that poetry should be a clear statement that uses traditional meters since they alone could exploit the full emotional potential of language to convey feeling, which is framed by understanding the poem. Language should be charged with emotion that is sufficient enough to convey the idea. He rejects emotionalism or mysticism in poetry. He believes that the primary function of criticism is the evaluation of art.

R.P. Blackmur (1904-1965)

He is one of the few New Critics to analyse fiction. He wrote on the English novelists like Henry James and D.H. Lawrence as well as some European and American novelists. He believes that criticism plays a limited role and its function is to remove obstacles between the text and the reader. He asserts that “no amount of linguistic analyses can explain the feeling or existence of a poem.” He shares the opinion of the New Critics on the autonomy of the text. He rejects extrinsic methods of criticism based on biography, psychology, history or Marxism. He values impersonality, objectivity and concreteness in poetry. His well-known essay is “Language as Gesture”. He uses the term “gesture” generally, to include rhythm and cadence and all the devices such as symbols which are used to express meaning indirectly.

Robert Penn Warren (1905-1988)

Warren has written novels and short stories, but his fame lies primarily in poetry. For him, creative writing is primary to criticism. He initiated and edited the *Southern Review* in 1935 along with Cleanth Brooks, till it ceased publication in 1942. They compiled the anthologies, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), *Understanding Fiction* (1943) and *Modern Rhetoric* (1949). Warren does not believe in following a particular methodology of criticism and emphasises that the New Critics have no coherent principle.

In addition to criticism of poetry, Warren has written essays on William Faulkner, Henry James, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway and Joseph Conrad. Warren reiterates that poetry should be neither an outpouring of sentiment nor propaganda for an ideology. His plea is for a kind of inclusive poetry, which would employ irony and juxtapose contrasting moods. He is known for his book *A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading* (1946), which is a detailed study, written as an essay on the poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Coleridge.

The “intentional fallacy” and the “affective fallacy”

In *The Dictionary of World Literature*, edited by Joseph T. Shipley in 1942, Wimsatt and Beardsley had earlier argued that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a literary art.” The essay “The Intentional Fallacy” was published in 1946, in the *Sewanee Review*.

By “intention”, Wimsatt and Beardsley mean “the design or plan in the author’s mind” and the author’s “attitude towards his work, the way he felt, what made him right.” The author’s intention has an effect on every aspect of literary criticism. The essay “The Affective Fallacy”, first published in 1949, presents a theoretical formulation of another aspect of the attempt of the New Critics to objectively focus on the work itself. They feel that the critic should not be concerned with the emotional effects of the work on the reader.

These fallacies are obstacles to objective criticism. While the “intentional fallacy” presents the confusion between the poem and its origin, and the mistaken attempt to judge a poem by its causes, the “affective fallacy” is the misunderstanding between the poem and its results. The “intentional fallacy” tries to project the judgement of the poet, but the “affective fallacy” derives its principles from the psychological effects of the poem, and criticism would end in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of both the fallacies is that attention is deflected from the poem itself, and hence result in improper assessment of a work of art.
