

PAPER- LITERARY CRITICISM

Introduction to Cleanth Brooks and New Criticism

Introduction

English literary tradition is of the view that New Criticism, as a mode of literary analysis ushered the beginning of a new era of criticism in America and Britain. Though this seems to be general contention, it would be impossible to ignore the indispensable contribution of New Criticism to the development of literary theory and criticism. Before the advent of New Criticism, literary analysis was largely philological, biographical, historical, psychoanalytic and to a little extent Marxist in approach. The emergence of New Criticism as a mode literary analysis during the 1930's and the 1940's, witnessed the shift from the author to the text. The method of textual analysis focused on close reading of the 'text itself', which was phenomenal and unheard. New Criticism gradually established itself as a practice that wielded critical acumen and recognition. However, the aspect of 'close reading' was instrumental in ushering other literary and critical movements that would in turn widen the scope and analytic prowess of New Criticism from a completely new dimension, especially the critical practice called Deconstruction.

The Formative Years

The six basic tenets of New Criticism were enumerated by John Crowe Ransom in 1937 in the essay "Criticism Inc." published in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* in 1937. Ransom defined their critical practice through what they were not supposed to be concerned with:

- 1) Personal registration: Describing the effect of a work on the reader cannot be considered literary criticism. A text exists for its own sake. This point is developed by Wimsatt and Beardsley in "The Affective Fallacy". Ransom warns against ascribing qualities to an object which would have subjective effects, such as the use of moving, exciting, pitiful, and wonderful among others.
- 2) Synopsis and paraphrase: Discussing the synopsis of a novel or the prose paraphrase of a poem does not relate to literary criticism. The actual content of the work should be analysed.
- 3) Historical studies: Collecting information on the author's biography, autobiographical evidence, the literary background can be useful as reference materials, but literary criticism should not constitute of analysis based on these findings.
- 4) Linguistic studies: Studies concerning meaning of words and idioms is based on proper understanding of the text. Linguistic studies alone cannot produce a critic.
- 5) Moral studies: Readers could apply their own moral standards. The moral content cannot be taken as the whole content of the work. Criticism is concerned with the whole content.
- 6) Any other special studies: Views related to sociology, geography, interdisciplinary areas, law could be considered. Particular reference to Milton's cosmology or geography, and Shakespeare's understanding of law does not constitute criticism. Only when the critic discusses the creative writer's literary assimilation of material pertaining to other disciplines, he can analyze the contribution of Shakespeare or Milton to his poetry.

The group formulated close textual analysis of poetry, which they described as an autonomous aesthetic discourse. Moreover, the New Critics were also post-Kantians

who believed that reality was always mediated, and therefore no particular discourse would be the proper form of reality. Despite their critical insight throughout the thirties, most of their critical writings were published in the “little journals”, the literary journals outside the academic institution, and remained insignificant.

Teaching at schools in the South and South-East United States, the New Critics remained marginal until they were essentially bought up by affluent universities in the North and North-East during the period from 1939 to 1941. This buying up of the New Critics by prominent, usually Ivy League schools can be seen as the first step of the institutionalisation of the New Critics as individuals.

It was during this period that they would practically use their critical language developed over the thirties into practice as a teaching and critical practice. However, their movement would not gain prominence until after the Second World War. It is during the post-war years that the New Criticism strongly opposed the established literary institution in the university that promoted literary biography and philology. New Criticism was perceived to be a threat by the literary institution in the university. Yet, their rise proved to be one of major changes in the literary circles during the post-war years.

Though the term “New Criticism” came into being only in 1941, its theoretical foundations had been laid in the twenties and the thirties by a group of American critics and poets namely John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and later Cleanth Brooks. The impetus to tune literary analysis to objectivity and poetry was instilled by I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot much earlier.

The Contribution of Cleanth Brooks

Brooks is one of the founders of *The Southern Review* and known for his important books *Modern Poetry and Tradition* (1939) and *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947). The texts *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943), in collaboration with Robert Penn Warren and *Understanding Drama* (1947) with Robert Hielman, prove to be a turning point in literary criticism. These books revolutionised reading and the teaching of literature in the classroom. *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) presents a revised history of English poetry and resembles *Revaluation* (1936) by F.R. Leavis, in emphasising the tradition of wit in seventeenth century English poetry. *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957), dedicated to René Wellek was written in collaboration with Wimsatt and contains information on critical precepts of various movements in literary criticism from the beginnings to the 1950's. His fiction, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963) is considered to be the best of his later works.

Louise Cowan is of the view that Brooks is “one of the most highly accomplished textual readers in the language.” According to Brooks, poetry uses a particular kind of language that imparts knowledge which is different from the other modes of artistic expression. Human experience is vividly expressed in poems and this sustains artistic culture. Brooks’ formalist approach to criticism explores “the interior life of the poem”, where metaphor, paradox, irony, intellect and wit are the main tools used in delineating the concept of poetry.

Understanding Poetry prescribes the technique of focusing upon a poem as language rather than reading it as history, biography or morality. Brooks and Warren

analyse the effect of words, rhythms, structures and poetic techniques on the total meaning of the poems chosen for interpretation. They opine that the method of understanding or reading a poem is complex. A poem is considered to be a literary object and nothing else. It is a self-sufficient entity that proves its effect by itself and that is why attention should be paid to the poem itself.

Poetry aims to precisely manifest attitudes, feelings, and interpretations while the ordinary treatment of objects is vague and blurred. Poetry regulates words and excites the reader's imagination. The seventeenth century poets, Marvell and Donne are eulogised more than the Romantics and even Shakespeare. Keats is considered to be of greater importance than the others in the Romantic tradition because of the sensuousness and concreteness of his artistic expression.

Brooks condemns three established notions of poetry; the first is the erroneous belief that poetry is the best realisation of the best mind. This misconception sets both the reader and the critics find ideas, message and philosophy of poetry, but this is not the true function of literature. The second charge is that poetry is not a substitute for an actual emotional experience. Many critics who fail to explore the statement of ideas arrive at the conclusion that the poetry is not an expression of ideas but of pure emotion. It is an expression of a moment of pure realization of being. Brooks objects the third misleading notion that poetry is a beautiful statement of some high truth combined in a mechanical way. Brooks argues that the beauty of poetry lies within the poem itself and expresses itself in terms of the characteristics of poetry. He puts forward the concept of "organic nature of poetry."

In his view, the various elements of poetry – noble thoughts, vivid images, diction, music, rhythmic movement and rhyme are not poetic in themselves. Conversely, he thinks poetry can have unpleasant or disagreeable ideas, bizarre images, cacophony and faltering rhythm. Real criticism is an exploration and analysis of the internal relationship of the various elements, irrespective of their beauty or ugliness. The soul of poetry, considers Brooks, is the organic organisation of the parts.

Modern Poetry and Tradition (1939) is the outcome of the synthesis of various ideas of poetry and it is considered to be "the most satisfactory single statement of aesthetic formalist critical doctrine thus far produced." Brooks appears as an advocate of modern poetry, explicating the poetry of Eliot, Ransom, Tate, Frost, Auden, Yeats and other twentieth century poets. Brooks' idea of tradition is explained in the two chapters, "Metaphor and Tradition" and "The Modern Poet and the Tradition". Brooks' concept of tradition is quite different from that of Eliot. In *Notes for a Revised History of English Poetry*, Brooks strongly recommends a revised history of English poetry, because of his dissatisfaction with the existing norms, values, practices and judgement of English poetry.

In the essay "The Formalist Critic", he presents the basic assumptions of the New Critics. "Literary criticism is a description and evaluation of its object" and concerns itself with the work of art. In reply to those who argue that works of art should not be isolated from the authors' life or the readers and their response, he replies that biography and history may be interesting, but they should not be confused with an account of the work. He asserts: "Such studies describe the process of composition, not the structure of the thing composed, and they may be performed quite as validly for the poor work as the good one. They may be validly performed for any kind of experience –

non literary as well as literary.” Brooks implies that it is the duty of the critic to be concerned with value judgements. The critic should examine the value of the literary work, whether it is literary or non-literary.

In the essay “The Language of Paradox”, the first chapter of *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, Brooks mentions that it is important to employ the indirect method for poetry. He says that literary language conveys a meaning which is different from science that is one-dimensional and unambiguous. He says: “Paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientists whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox.” After examining the use of paradox by Wordsworth in two of his sonnets, he moves on to study the employment of paradox in Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* and as continuation of this argument makes a close reading of *The Canonisation* by John Donne in the concluding part of the essay.

“The Heresy of Paraphrase” is the ultimate essay in the collection *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. The essay emphasises the specificity and verbal density of poetry. Poetic language cannot be translated into prose statements. The meaning of a poem cannot be reduced to anything outside the poem, whether it is an experience, an idea, or an intention. To take the example of the poem *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats; it cannot be reduced to statements about life and death. If the theme of the poem is taken in isolation from the poem, the poetic texture of the poem is stripped off, which makes the poem what it is. The poetic texture does not function as an ornament to convey meaning; on the contrary, it conveys the poet’s realisation of a complex human response to life. Content and form are inseparable. To paraphrase a poem is not a literary criticism.

In the essay “The Heresy of Paraphrase”, he lays stress on irony and the organic structure of a poem and uses the same metaphor as in “Irony as a Principle of Structure”. He says the essential structure of a poem resembles architecture or painting. His close reading of Marvel’s *An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland* shows that the New Critics do not ignore historical considerations. He is of the view that the critic must know the linguistic context and the meaning of words as they were used at a particular period. Knowledge of history is essential to understand a poem concerned with historical figures such as Cromwell and Charles I. However, in such a poem, the most important thing is poetic organisation, which would include paradox, irony and ambiguity.

Summary

New Criticism expresses its disagreement with historical, social and biographical reading of texts. Based in the South, in America the group of critics did not gain recognition until they were bought by the prosperous Ivy League schools in Northern America. It was during this period that they put into practice, their principles and in teaching and criticism. However, their movement flourished only after the Second World War. Their critical stand was explicitly specified by Ransom in the essay “Criticism Inc.”, where Ransom declares that criticism is not supposed to be 1) Personal registration;

2) Synopsis and paraphrase; 3) Historical studies; 4) Linguistic studies; 5) Moral studies; and 6) Any other special studies. The group advocated close textual analysis of poetry, which they described as an independent and authentic discourse. The American critic John Crowe Ransom describes the novel approach to literary criticism in *The New Criticism* (1941).

Cleanth Brooks is one of influential New Critics, whose works *Modern Poetry and Tradition* (1939) and *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) contain his views on poetry, and the appreciation of the text in relation to its internal qualities such as metaphor, irony, simile and paradox. The harmony of these elements with the structure of the poem would constitute a whole. Poetry seen as an organic whole would represent true artistic creativity. The realisation of this unity is important for a critic. The texts *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943), in collaboration with Robert Penn Warren and *Understanding Drama* (1947) with Robert Hielman, delineate the principles on the New Critics in relation to the use of artistic devices. They are not to be seen as ornaments, but as special features that work to realize the objective of the poems. These books changed the concept of reading and teaching of literature in academic circles.

Modern Poetry and the Tradition (1939) presents a revised history of English poetry. *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957), dedicated to René Wellek was written in collaboration with Wimsatt and contains information on the various movements in literary criticism. His fiction, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963) is an exemplary work.

References

Web Links

https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.34395/2015.34395.Well-Wrought-Urn-Studies-In-The-Structure-Of-Poetry_djvu.txt

https://www.jstor.org/stable/27544142?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Well-Wrought-Urn>

https://isistatic.org/journal-archive/ma/40_01/gurney.pdf

http://seas3.elte.hu/coursematerial/GardosBalint/New_Criticism_reading.pdf

<https://imageryandbeyond.wordpress.com/2013/02/01/the-language-of-paradox-1947-cleanth-brooks/>

<http://www.tijdschriftframe.nl/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/03.-Joost-Burgers-Tropes-in-Distention-Cleanth-Brookes-and-the-Rise-of-the-Paradox-in-Postwar-America-main.pdf>

Blamires, Harry. *A History of Literary Criticism*. Macmillan, 1990.

Brooks, Cleanth. "In Search of New Criticism." *American Scholar*, vol. 53, 1984, pp.43.

---. *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. Brace and Company, 1970.

Cowan, Louise. *The Southern Critics*. University of Dallas Press, 1971.

Eagleton Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Basil Blackwell, 1985.

Lodge, David, editor. *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*. Longman, 1972.

Nagarajan, M.S. *English Literary Criticism and Theory: An Introductory History*. Orient Longman, 2007.

Newton, K.M. *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*. Macmillan, 1997.
Selden, Raman, editor. *The Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present: A Reader*.
Longman, 1988.

OBJECTIVES

- To comprehend the origin of New Criticism and the formation of the group of New Critics.
- To comprehend the critical theory of Cleanth Brooks.
- To outline the important works of Cleanth Brooks.
- To analyse the contribution of Cleanth Brooks to New Criticism

Frequently asked Questions (FAQ)

Answer the following questions in a sentence or two.

1. What was the condition of literary criticism before the advent of New Criticism in America?
a. Literary analysis was largely philological, biographical, historical, psychoanalytic and to a little extent Marxist in approach.
2. Which are the six basic tenets of what is not criticism according to Ransom?
a. 1) Personal registration; 2) Synopsis and paraphrase; 3) Historical studies; 4) Linguistic studies; 5) Moral studies; and 6) Any other special studies.
3. What did the new group of critics formulate?
a. The group formulated close textual analysis of poetry, which they described as an autonomous aesthetic discourse. Moreover, the New Critics were also post-Kantians who believed that reality was always mediated, and therefore no particular discourse would be the proper form of reality.
4. What does Brooks mention about the language of poetry?
a. Poetry uses a particular kind of language that imparts knowledge which is different from the other modes of artistic expression. Human experience is vividly expressed in poems and this sustains artistic culture.
5. What do Brooks and Warren analyse in *Understanding Poetry*?
a. Brooks and Warren analyse the effect of words, rhythms, structures and poetic techniques on the total meaning of the poems chosen for interpretation.

Answer the questions in a paragraph of 100 words

1. The six basic tenets of New Criticism were enumerated by John Crowe Ransom in the essay "Criticism Inc."
a. **Hints:** published in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* in 1937- not supposed to be concerned with:
1) Personal registration: effect of a work on the reader - Wimsatt and Beardsley in "The Affective Fallacy". - ascribing qualities to an object which would have subjective effects, such as the use of moving, exciting, pitiful, and wonderful among others.
2) Synopsis and paraphrase: discussing the synopsis of a novel or the prose paraphrase
3) Historical studies: author's biography, autobiographical evidence, the literary background can be useful as reference materials
4) Linguistic studies: Linguistic studies alone cannot produce a critic.

- 5) Moral studies: The moral content cannot be taken as the whole content of the work.
- 6) Any other special studies: Views related to sociology, geography, interdisciplinary areas, law could be considered. Particular references- creative writer's literary assimilation of material pertaining to other disciplines.

2. Literary essays by Cleanth Brooks

a. Hints: In "The Formalist Critic- basic assumptions of the New Critics. "Literary criticism is a description and evaluation of its object" - works of art should not be isolated from the authors' life or the readers and their response, he replies that biography and history may be interesting, but they should not be confused with an account of the work- Brooks implies that it is the duty of the critic to be concerned with value judgements. The critic should examine the value of the literary work, whether it is literary or non-literary.

In the essay "The Language of Paradox", the first chapter of *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, Brooks mentions that it is important to employ the indirect method for poetry. He says that literary language conveys a meaning which is different from science that is one-dimensional and unambiguous- scientists whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox- paradox by Wordsworth in two of his sonnets- Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* and as continuation of this argument- makes a close reading of *The Canonisation* by John Donne in the concluding part of the essay.

"The Heresy of Paraphrase" is the ultimate essay in the collection *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*- the specificity and verbal density of poetry- Poetic language cannot be translated into prose statements- *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats- it cannot be reduced to statements about life and death- The poetic texture does not function as an ornament to convey meaning; on the contrary, it conveys the poet's realisation of a complex human response to life- stress on irony and the organic structure of a poem and uses the same metaphor as in "Irony as a Principle of Structure"- He says the essential structure of a poem resembles architecture or painting. His close reading of Marvel's *An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland* shows that the New Critics do not ignore historical considerations- Knowledge of history is essential to understand - important thing is poetic organisation, which would include paradox, irony and ambiguity.

Answer the following question in an essay of about 250 words

1. Contribution of Cleanth Brooks

a. Elaborate: Cleanth Brooks is one of the influential New Critics, whose works *Modern Poetry and Tradition* (1939) and *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) contain his views on poetry, and the appreciation of the text in relation to for its internal qualities such as metaphor, irony, simile and paradox- harmony of these elements with the structure of the poem would constitute a whole. Poetry seen as an organic whole would represent true artistic creativity- realisation of this unity is important for a critic. The texts *Understanding Poetry* (1938) *And Understanding Fiction* (1943), in collaboration with Robert Penn Warren and *Understanding Drama* (1947) with Robert Hielman, delineate the principles on the New Critics in relation to the use of

artistic devices. They are not to be seen as ornaments, but as special features that work to realize the objective of the poems- *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) presents a revised history of English poetry. *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957), dedicated to René Wellek was written in collaboration with Wimsatt, contains information on the various movements in literary criticism- fiction, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963) is an exemplary work.

Quiz

1. In which essay did John Crowe Ransom enumerate the six basic tenets of New Criticism ?
a. "Criticism Inc." b. "The Formalist Critic" c. "The Language of Paradox"
d. "The Perfect Critic"
2. Earlier, most of the critical writings of the so called New Critics were published in the literary journals outside the academic institution known as
a. *The Kenyon Review* b. *The Southern Review* c. "little journals" d. *The Sewanee Review*
3. Brooks wrote *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction* in collaboration with
a. T.S.Eliot b. Ransom c. Irving Babbitt d. Robert Penn Warren
4. Brooks wrote *Understanding Drama* in collaboration with
a. Robert Hielman b. R.S.Crane c. Robert Penn Warren d. Ransom
5. Who mentions: "Literary criticism is a description and evaluation of its object".
a. Allen Tate b. Cleanth Brooks . c. Ransom d. Wimsatt

Glossary

contention: opinion; belief

acumen: insight

prowess: competency

Ivy League School: Comprises of eight schools, recognized as elite colleges. The eight members of this group are Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell university, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, The University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University and Yale University.

The Southern Review: A quarterly literary magazine Founded in 1935 by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks on the campus of Louisiana State University, it publishes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry from contributors around the world and responds to the diversity of its contemporary readership.

bizarre: grotesque

Assignment

I. Answer the following questions in a sentence or two.

1. The method of textual analysis focused by the New Critics.
2. How did the American New Critics get institutionalised?
3. Brooks condemns three established notions of poetry. Which are they?

4. What does Cleanth Brooks mention in *Modern Poetry and Tradition*?
5. What is Ivy League school?
6. What is “little journals”?

II. Answer the questions in a paragraph of 100 words

1. Argument in the essay “The Heresy of Paraphrase”
2. Essays by Cleanth Brooks

III. Answer the following question in an essay of about 250 words

1. The critical output of Cleanth Brooks.

Subject Expert (Official Address)

Dr. C.G.Shyamala

Assistant Professor

Post-graduate Dept. of English and

Research Centre for Comparative Studies

Mercy College, Palakkad
