

PAPER: LITERARY CRITICISM

New Criticism: Rise and Decline

The Early Stages

Among his contemporaries, T.S.Eliot exerted profound influence on New Criticism. When *The Sacred Wood* was published in 1920, it started a trend in criticism, mainly descriptive then, termed New Criticism. The term was put into use by Joel E. Spingarn and all its major practitioners have been either English or American. In 1941, the poet John Crowe Ransom wrote a book, reviewing the criticism of I.A.Richards, T,S,Eliot and Yvor Winters to which he gave the title *The New Criticism*. In Ransom's book there is an essay titled "Wanted – an Ontological Critic", where he pleads for the establishment of an intellectual moment that deserves to be named New Criticism.

In America, the movement asserted itself as a reaction against the existing modes of critical practices that were characterised by subjectivity, and aesthetic impressionism. Such an appreciation of art was evident in the philosophical humanist movement of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More; the Marxist principles of Granville Hicks and Edmund Wilson. The impetus to the rise of New Criticism is also seen in Imagism in poetry and Hulmes' essay "Classicism and Romanticism." John Crowe Ransom taught his principles to his students Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, who later developed their own New Critical practices. Eliot, in the essays "Perfect Critic" and the "Imperfect Critic", mentions that criticism should be devoid of personal emotions and good criticism is the outcome of a refined sensibility.

The American New Critics are John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R.P. Blackmur , Kenneth Burke, Yvor Winters, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren and William Wimsatt. The English new critics are I A. Richards, Willam Empson and the Scrutiny Critics, Leavis, L.C.Knights and Derek Traverse. Though the American and British New Critics shared many attitudes, they differed from each other on the philosophic notions of criticism. New criticism does not represent a group of critics who share the same opinions and beliefs. Each critic is highly individual in his proposition. However, both these groups of New Critics opposed the system of literary criticism that existed during their time.

The Characteristic Features of New Criticism

- New Criticism denounces historical and biographical methods of literary criticism that were prevalent during the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. The historical and biographical approaches give importance to extrinsic factors such as history and biography to critically comment on a text. New Critics however, concentrate on intrinsic factors such as the text and its words.
- Intentional fallacy and Affective fallacy are considered impediments to objective criticism. According to the New Critics, the text provides all evidences which can be analysed and verified by locating image, metaphor, plot, character, rhyme and metre.
- The New Critics view the literary work to be an autonomous verbal object. Its complex meaning cannot be deciphered through paraphrasing or translating it into another language.

- The New Critics emphasise “close reading”. The term is derived from I.A.Richards’ *Practical Criticism* (1929) and William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). A “close reading” of a text is done when the reader analyses diction, meter, sound, imagery, narrative structure, point-of-view, rhyme scheme and other techniques to express a point of view and to develop a deep and precise understanding of the text’s form, craft, and meanings. The New Critics seek to determine the function and appropriateness of these elements to the self-contained work.
- New Criticism is of the view that the nature of literary language is different from the scientific or the common language. While the scientific language points to the world outside, literary language organises linguistic resources into a unique kind of arrangement in order to create aesthetic experience.
- The form of literary language is inseparable from its content and meaning. What a text means and how it means it are the same. A work has an ideal, organic unity, in which all elements contribute to create a whole. It is through this unity that a New Critic values a literary work. The organic unity contributes to the complexity of a work.
- The complexity of a work is often the result of multiple meanings that are produced by devices such as irony, paradox, ambiguity, and tension. These devices contribute to the harmony of a work, which provide an interpretation of human experience.
- The examination of the formal elements, which contribute to the unity of the work, is called close reading. There are also other figurative elements such as images, similes, metaphors, symbols, and myth, which unify a work.

The Postulates of New Criticism

The New Critics maintain that their interpretations are solely based on the context and the language of the text. Their critical practice is called intrinsic criticism. This means that their criticism takes place within the purview of the text. All other methods are called extrinsic because they are the external causes, details or tools that are required for interpreting the text. New criticism insists on focusing on the text alone. Basically, New Criticism is founded on the premise that the text is an autotelic artefact. It is complete in itself and exists for its own sake. The relationship of the text with the world beyond itself does not appeal to the New Critic. The practice of close reading of the literary text advocated by the New Critics brought together many critics, who differed widely in their methods of close reading.

The Chicago Critics

Associated with the University of Chicago from the 1940’s, the Chicago Critics are a group of formalist American literary critics that influenced American criticism during the latter half of the twentieth century. The prominent critics of this group are Richard McKeon, R.S.Crane, Elder Olson, Bernard Weinberg and Norman Mclean. They are called “Aristotelian” or “Neo- Aristotelian” because of their interest in form and genre. They gave importance to the judgement of the author’s solutions to particular problems in the construction of the text. *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*

(1952), edited by R.S.Crane, contains the precepts of this school of critics. A detailed analysis of the theory of this group's method is found in Crane's *The Study of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (1953). Wayne C. Booth is a second generation Chicago critic who applied the principles of the Chicago School to fiction, explained in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961).

Formalism

Formalism, also known as Russian Formalism, is an innovative literary school of criticism that developed in twentieth century Russia. The school comprises of two schools, Moscow Linguistic Circle founded in 1915 and OPOYAZ, in 1916. The members of the Moscow Linguistic Circle included Osip Brik, Boris Eikhenbaum, Yury Tyananov, and Boris Tomashevsky. OPOYAZ is the acronym for the Russian words that mean "Society for the Study of Poetic Language". The school was led by Viktor Schklovsky and started functioning at St. Petersburg.

The formalists emphasized form and technique over content and looked for the specificity of literature as an independent verbal art. Formalists postulated the "emphasis on the medium" by finding out how literature, especially poetry, was able to alter artistically or "make strange" common language so that the everyday world could be "defamiliarized." They based their assumptions on the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure and Symbolism, but objected to Marxist interpretation of texts

The notions of autonomy of the text and the discontinuity between literary and other uses of language were acceptable to the Formalists. However, they preferred greater objectivity and scientific critical approach compared to the Symbolists. They studied the various functions of "literariness" as methods to separate poetry and fictional narrative from other forms of discourse. In 1929, the movement suffered a setback when it was condemned for lack of a political outlook. The structural linguist Roman Jakobson introduced the methods of Formalism to the Western world, and the American New Critics adopted some of its principles. For this reason, American New Criticism is sometimes referred to as Formalism

Objections to New Criticism.

Several prominent literary critics challenged New Critical methods during its heyday. René Wellek, in his essay "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra" declares that New Criticism has become outdated. He gives four reasons- first, its disregard for the social function of nature, second the unhistorical method of criticism, third it aims to make criticism scientific, and fourth it seems like the revival of the Art for Art's Sake movement. This critical practice is only a tool useful at the level of trying to learn literary texts and poetry in particular.

The Chicago critics refer to the New Critics as the "radical reformers" of literary study. They object to New Criticism because its method of reasoning is deductive and dialectical. It forces everything into a fixed method making it inappropriate for literary study. R.S.Crane, one of the Chicago Critics, attacked Brooks and the other New Critics for their "critical monism", which was evident in their unquestioning adherence to poetry, and continued preoccupation with lyrical poetry. Alfred Kazin, in the early 1940s, accused New Criticism as "fetishized formalism".

The Myth Critics criticised New Criticism. A myth is a system of symbols or metaphors, which is a central device in New Criticism. The myth critic identifies myth with literature. They are not concerned with judgment or evaluation. They discuss myth as part of the content apart from the poem itself. The Geneva school, the structuralists and the Russian formalists disagree with New Criticism.

The New Critics' ahistorical approach to the study of literature was denounced because they depoliticised literature and, thereby maintained a political status quo. The early twenty-first century critics found that New Criticism was limited in focus and maintained severe methodological procedures for the analysis of texts.

The Contribution of New Criticism

New Critics are not averse to historical knowledge, but they feel that it should be subordinate to the interpretation of the poem. The New Critics Brooks and Winters are known to be historical scholars. For the New Critics, poetry is not cut off from the world, but is always directed and bound by it. They stand for the organic unity of the poem. They are formalists because they see the poem not as an act of communication but as an artifact, which contains a certain principle of organisation.

The New Critics are opposed to science and this notion is not acceptable to those who maintain that criticism could be considered science. New Critics do not agree to all the views held by the Russian formalists. They stress the cognitive value of poetry and consider poetry to be a unique object of knowledge, which has a special ontological status. Criticism is not a lifeless and neutral science. Close reading is encouraged. It is viewed to be an activity that leads to judgment and discrimination between good and bad poems. The New Critics proposed close reading to foreground the unity of a work.

New Criticism considers a work of art to be a structure with its own principles; this structure has coherence and unity and does not depend upon its origins or effects. It does not yield abstract knowledge. The literary journals such as *Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review* promoted the critical writing of the New Critics.

The Decline of New Criticism

The New Critics have done much to advance literary criticism and the understanding of the literary form. However, New Criticism declined on the grounds of opposition from several movements. Structuralism opposes the focus of New Criticism on individual works and isolation. Deconstruction rejects the assumptions of New Criticism. While the New Critics proposed close reading to stress the unity of a work, Deconstruction proposed deconstructive close reading to reveal the fissures, discontinuities and instabilities within a work.

The notion of objectivity of New Historicism is different from that of New Criticism. In the late 1960's, the status and influence of New Criticism decreased. Modern theories that emerged during the late twentieth century analysed the limits of New Criticism through revision and extension of its concepts.

New Criticism is a realisation of the assumptions drawn from Aristotle, Kant and Coleridge, recreated and merged, culminating in the modernist literary tradition. With the influence exerted by several new fields of analysis, New Criticism declined as a critical practice. The New Critics had underemphasized the roles of the reader and the

poet by overemphasizing the object, which is the poem. This gave rise to the counter-movement called hermeneutics.

In opposition to the neglect of the role of the reader in literary studies, Reader-response theories and Reception aesthetics materialised. Structuralists and post structuralists emphasise the flow of textuality. There is no way of separating the text from the influence of intertextuality and there is no special form of language for poetry. New Criticism is responsible for the emergence of other related studies like Women's Studies, Black Studies and Comparative Literature, which have become popular in literary criticism. In this sense, it can be stated that New Criticism has paved the way for widening the scope of literary studies from diverse perspectives.

Summary

Developed by a group of American critics who taught at southern universities after the First World War, New Criticism is an approach to literary studies. It is anti-impressionistic, anti-historical, and against social and biographical concerns. This school of literary criticism came about in the 1920's and 1930's. The rigorous study of the text and its inherent elements was central for New literary criticism. The American critic John Crowe Ransom describes the novel approach to literary criticism in *The New Criticism* (1941).

New Criticism emphasises close attention to the internal parts of the text itself, and denounces external evidences to explain a work. The method followed by the New Critics could be characterised as close reading, and concentrating on formal aspects like rhythm, meter, theme, imagery, and metaphor among others for interpreting the text, because these aspects espouse the structure of meaning within the text.

The concept of the poem as a coherent, organic whole, which reconciled its internal conflicts and achieved some final balance was proposed by Coleridge, and the New Critics followed his dictum. Privilege was given to poetry over other forms of literary expression. Poetry exemplified the literary values which they endorsed. However, the techniques of close reading and structural analysis of texts have been applied to fiction, drama and other genres of literature to a certain extent.

New Criticism continued to influence literary circles and its approach of analysis as a strict, clear and direct practice was followed until the 1960's where its influence began to wane. With the rise of Marxist, hermeneutic, structuralist, and feminist criticism in the 1960s, New Criticism paved the way for a variety of theoretical and historicist literary concerns.

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OBJECTIVES

- Delineate the causes for the rise of New Criticism.
- Comprehend the significant features of New Criticism
- Comprehend the postulates of New Criticism
- Outline the contribution of New Criticism to literary theory.
- Frame the objections raised against New Criticism.
- Explain the shortcomings of New Criticism that led to its decline

Frequently asked Questions (FAQ)

Answer the following questions in a sentence or two.

1. What did New Criticism oppose?
 - a. In America, the movement asserted itself as a reaction against the existing modes of critical practices that were characterised by subjectivity and aesthetic impressionism.
2. Who did New Criticism disregard?
 - a. New Criticism disregarded subjective appreciation of art that was evident in the philosophical humanist movement of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More as well as the Marxist principles of Granville Hicks and Edmund Wilson. The impetus to the rise of New Criticism is also seen in Imagism in poetry.
3. What does Ransom's essay request for?
 - a. Ransom's essay titled "Wanted – an Ontological Critic", pleads for the establishment of an intellectual movement that deserves to be named New Criticism.
4. What does New Criticism mention about literary language?
 - a. New Criticism is of the view that the nature of literary language is different from the scientific or the common language. While the scientific language points to the world outside, literary language organises linguistic resources into a unique kind of arrangement in order to create aesthetic experience.
5. Name the journals that espoused the writings of the New Critics.
 - a. The literary journals *Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review* promoted the critical writing of the New Critics.

6. The reasons mentioned by René Wellek to show that New Criticism is an outmoded critical practice

a. He gives four reasons- first, its disregard for the social function of nature, second the unhistorical method of criticism, third it aims to make criticism scientific, and fourth it seems like the revival of the Art for Art's Sake movement. This critical practice is only a tool useful at the level of trying to learn literary texts and poetry in particular.

Answer the questions in a paragraph of 100 words

1. The postulates of New Criticism

a. **Hints:** The New Critics maintain that their interpretations are solely based on the context and the language of the text. -intrinsic criticism- extrinsic because they are the external causes, details or tools that required for interpreting the text- focusing on the text - text is an autotelic artifact- for its own sake. The relationship of the text with the world beyond itself does not appeal to the New Critic- critics together that differed widely in their methods of close reading.

2. Contribution of New Critics.

a. **Hints:** not averse to historical knowledge - Brooks and Winters are known to be historical scholars - poetry is not – poem contains a certain principle of organization- opposed to science and this is not acceptable for those who maintain that criticism could be considered science - disagree with the views held by the Russian formalists- stress the cognitive value of poetry and consider poetry to be a unique object of knowledge, which has a special ontological status - Criticism is not a lifeless and neutral science - close reading is encouraged - activity that leads to judgment and discrimination between good and bad poems- The critic's job is to see the work "as a totality"- considers a work of art to be a structure with its own principles - The literary journals such as *Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review* promoted the critical writing of the New Critics.

Answer the following question in an essay of about 250 words

1. The principal traits of New Criticism

a. **Elaborate:** New Criticism denounces historical and biographical methods of literary criticism - New Critics concentrate on intrinsic factors such as the text and its words. Intentional fallacy and Affective fallacy are considered impediments to objective criticism- text provides all evidences which can be analysed and verified -the literary -an autonomous verbal object- complex meaning cannot be deciphered through paraphrasing or translating it into another language- the nature of literary language is different from the scientific or the common language- The form of literary language is inseparable from its content and meaning - a work has an ideal, organic unity, in which all elements contribute to create a whole- unity that a New Critic values a literary work. - complexity of a work is often the result of multiple meanings that are produced by devices such as irony, paradox, ambiguity, and tension. These devices contribute to the harmony of a work, which provide an interpretation of human experience - close reading - images, similes, metaphors, symbols, and myth, which unify a work.

Quiz

1. Which critic pleads for the establishment of an intellectual movement that deserves to be named New Criticism?

- a. T.S.Eliot **b.Ransom** c.Winters d. I.A.Richards

2. Who wrote the essay "Classicism and Romanticism"?

- a.T.E.Hulme** b.Cleanth Brooks c.I.A.Richards d. Ransom

3. Who mentions that criticism should be devoid of personal emotions and good criticism is the outcome of a refined sensibility?

- a.Allen Tate b.Irving Babbitt c.Ransom **d. T.S.Eliot**

4. Who refer to the New Critics as the radical reformers of literary study?

- a.New Historicists b.Humanists **c. The Chicago critics** d. Structuralists

5. New Criticism is founded on the premise that the text is

- a. simple **b. an autotelic artefact.** C.unimportant d. infinite

Glossary

R.S.Crane (1886-1967): An American literary critic, who belonged to the Chicago School of criticism. His works include *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (1952), and *The Study of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (1953), where the central notions of this school of critics have been explained in detail.

Alfred Kazin (1915-1998): An American critic and author noted for his studies on American Literature and his autobiographical writings. He abstained from textual or formal analysis of texts and preferred to focus on writers and their works on social, cultural and temporal grounds.

impediment: obstruction

autonomous: independent

espouse: promote; support

autotelic: a creative work having an end or purpose in itself.

artefact: object

endorse: support

Assignment

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

1. Define close reading
2. Name the American and British New Critics.
3. Why do the New Critics consider the text to be an autonomous verbal object?
4. How does complexity arise in a work?
5. What are considered to be the impediments to objective criticism?

6. What is meant by “critical monism”

II. Answer the questions in a paragraph of 100 words

1. Objections to New Criticism
 2. Causes for the decline of New Criticism.
 3. The Chicagio Critics
 4. Formalism

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

1. Reasons for the emergence and wane of New Criticism.

Subject Expert (Official Address)

Dr. C.G.Shyamala

Assistant Professor

Post-graduate Dept. of English and

Research Centre for Comparative Studies

Mercy College, Palakkad
