

New criticism

Literature



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New Criticism was a trend in literary theory that emphasized the predominance of the literary text: “ New Criticism was the dominant trend in English and American literary criticism in the mid twentieth century, from the 1920’s to the early 1960’s. Its adherents were emphatic in their advocacy of close reading and attention to texts themselves, and their rejection of criticism based on extra-textual sources, especially biography. At their best, New Critical readings were brilliant, articulately argued, and broad in scope, but sometimes they were idiosyncratic and moralistic” (Wikipedia).

The emergence of New Criticism coincided with the reaction from literary studies to the nineteenth century philological tradition and its emphases on extra-literary phenomena and biographism. Essentially, the adherents of the New Criticism school were opposed to the interpretation of literary texts in light of the authors’ lives, stating that the literary text is a self-sufficient entity and its significance is independent from reality in general.

One of the aspects which is less known and discussed is that the main theses of the New Criticism school had many affinities with Prague Structuralist Circle which was developing at the same time. Such elements as the rejection of the extra-textual in the interpretation of literature or of the author’s intention are to be encountered in the studies of the Prague structuralists too. The common denominator between the two schools – and this explains the nature of their focus – is Russian Formalism, which was developed in the early twentieth century and which had a very strong impact on the critical approaches of both schools.

The main theorists of New Criticism were: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, Robert Penn Warren, I. A. Richards, William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, William Wimsatt, & Monroe Beardsley. It was the 1941 book by John Crowe Ransom – *New Criticism* – that formally constituted the diverse critics into a school in its own right.

The New Critics were highly prolific and, although they are largely rejected today, their studies on literature became famous and a necessary reference in the history of literary criticism. Some of the most influential studies were: Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn*, Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*, and Richard's *Practical Criticism* or Monroe and Beardsley's essay "The Intentional Fallacy".

The main elements of New Criticism were:

NC sees the text as an autotelic (a word that was a NC fave) artifact; it is something autonomous, written for its own sake, unified (an aspect never fully fleshed out in any logical or coherent way by the NCs) in form, & independent of the writer's life, intent, etc. In fact- 3 of the major tenets of NC were:

1. self-sufficiency: the poem should be independent of biography, historical content or effect on the reader- which were called the Intentional, Historical & Affective fallacies.
2. unity: the poem should be a coherent whole- a very traditional view, albeit limited.
3. complexity: thought to be the central element of poetry. NC believed it was the reader's duty to seek this out in the art.

Violations of these tenets were examples of the Intentional Fallacy- that the artist's intent is the primary value of the art (Schneider, 1).

In other words, proper criticism was to avoid the three main fallacies and focus solely on the text. Ironically, it was these main assumptions that were challenged by later schools of criticism such as Reader Response or New Historicism, which argued for the importance of readership and historicity in our understanding of literature. The primacy of the text in unveiling the meaning of literature signified that the New Critics posited a direct relationship between form and meaning. Their analyses of literary texts consisted mostly of in-depth formal and structural discussions of poetic language and devices.

For instance, William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* focused solely on the semantic aspect of poetry, which he could grasp by an analysis of specific poetic devices such as paradox or metaphor. Many of the New Critics' statements took on an absolute value, consisting of formulations which resembled inviolable laws of literature. For example, Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn* starts with a definition of the relation between paradox and poetry as absolute: " Few of us are prepared to accept the statement that the language of poetry is the language of paradox" (Brooks, 3). Perhaps a wiser stance towards this matter – especially when it comes to finding specificity in poetry – might be to argue for a poetics of differences and a more relativistic point of view from which to contemplate paradox in the particular context of its use.

These absolute and generalizing stances towards literature were seriously challenged by many critics as reductive, eclectic and deterministic. As other critics from Reception or New Historicism schools have shown, a trans-historical or reader-blind approach to literature cannot do justice to the literary work, nor can it account for its meaning because there is a permanent dialogue between literature and reality, the text and its reader and the text's significance can be redefined in these encounters.

Works Cited

1. Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well-Wrought Urn. Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. Harcourt,
2. Brace and World, Inc., New York, 1947.
3. "New Criticism". Wikipedia. 18. 12. 2006 .
4. Schneider, Dan. "New Criticism: Same Old Game Redux". *On American Poetry Criticism & Other Dastardly -isms*. 18. 12. 2006 <http://www.cosmoetica.com/D20-DES14.htm>.