New Criticism Explained

Beginning in the 1920's and coalescing in the 1940's, an interpretative approach emerged that did not define literature as essentially the self-expressive product of the artist nor as an evaluative reflection or illumination of cultural history. These "New Critics" opposed the traditional critical practice of using historical or biographical data to interpret literature. Rather, they focused on the literary work as an autotelic (self-contained) object. The New Critic explores and assesses the meaning of literature through an analysis of its internal form. From the 1940's through the 1960's formalist principles defined the mainstream standards of good criticism. While many of the assumptions underlying New Criticism have been rejected by newer critical theories, the close reading of the text espoused by formalism remains a common mode of discourse in the literature classroom.

New Criticism Occurred Partially in Response To:

- Biographical Criticism that understood art primarily as a reflection of the author's life (sometimes to the point that the texts themselves weren't even read!).
- Competition for dollars and students from sciences in academia.
- New forms of mass literature and literacy, an increasingly consumerist society and the increasingly visible role of commerce, mass media, and advertising in people's lives.

For the New Critic or the Formalist, the meaning of a literary work is not determined by the author's intention, nor by the reader's perception, nor by the cultural background. Rather meaning is determined by the “achieved content” of the text. A poem may obviously be produced within a culture milieu and by an idiosyncratic personality, and it may even allude explicitly to these external social or biographical contexts. However, for the New Critic the poem is not a cultural or biographical artifact but rather an autonomous and self-determinant (i.e. “autotelic”) art object. The meaning of literature is not dependent upon its reflection of an external cultural reality; instead literary meaning is an intrinsic attribute of the work and therefore publicly accessible and verifiable.

The reader discovers meaning internally within the work through the experience of its organic unity. As its constituent parts juxtapose with or support one another, the literary work's unique architecture shapes its unifying theme(s). Describing the unique architecture or form of the literary work and analyzing the forces that make its parts work together -- this is how the New Critic understands and analyzes the meaning of literature.

Critical Assumptions

These basic assumptions undergird most Formalist criticism:

- The literary text is not a cultural artifact but a unified, self-contained and self-defining piece of art. The reader does not need specialized or detailed contextual knowledge beyond the text to understand meaning.
- The meaning of a literary text is conveyed inherently in its unique form or structure. Thus, the primary task of criticism is to highlight and explain the organic unity of a text.
- Just as a living organism contains organ systems by which it functions, so the literary text contains interrelated images and linguistic elements. These motifs are important manifestations of the organic structure of the text.
- Like an animal's organs, some images or motifs are crucial to the meaning of the text. These objective correlatives reflect the thematic unity of the text and its structure.
- Every piece of the text, like every cell in an organism or every brick in a building, contributes to the life or meaning of the text. Formalists ideally seek to explain and assess the function of all pieces of the text.
- Frequently, key elements of the literary work dramatize a tension central to the work's conflict or theme. Describing this tension within the work often exposes an irony or ambiguity crucial to literary meaning.

These last two assumptions make possible the dynamic dialogue of formalist criticism. One reader or critic cannot identify, much less account for, all pieces of even a modest literary text. However, formalist critics believe that collectively they can articulate the stable and absolute meaning of the text. Based upon the assumptions highlighted above, a Formalist discussion of literature usually includes the following:
• a discussion of the dramatic context of the literature to introduce its central theme(s) and tension. However, if the literary commentary entails only an overview of what the literature is "about" dramatically, it is guilty of the heresy of paraphrase.

• an analysis of this thematic tension in motifs in the literature. A discussion of these patterns of language and imagery delineates and validates the achieved content of the text--the reader's understanding of and response to the work.

• an assessment of aesthetic elements and techniques of the literature. A formalist analysis of literature usually focuses on how the literature comes to have its impact and meaning, i.e., its achieved content. Thus, the formalist identifies one or more parts of the organic structure of literature and explains how these parts contribute to the overall effect or meaning. The formalist is particularly interested in showing the relationships of various parts of the text. Frequently the formalist focuses upon the importance of point-of-view and irony in shaping the achieved content of the literary work.

In focus and style, formalist criticism contrasts sharply with historical criticism. The latter tends to focus on the "big picture" of culture reflected in the small canvas of the text. The impulse of the historical critic is to extrapolate from the text into the "real" world that the text is "really" about. The formalist critic, on the other hand, ignores that "real" external world and instead takes a magnifying glass or even a microscope to the intricate internal structure and aesthetic reality created by the patterns of language and imagery in the text. Yet, paradoxically, in its careful study of the aesthetic objectivity of the literary work, formalist criticism nonetheless seeks an illumination of universal truths.

Further New Critical Assumptions:

• The critic's job is to help us appreciate the technique and form of art and the mastery of the artist.

• The "Western tradition" is an unbroken, internally consistent set of artistic conventions and traditions going back to ancient Greece and continuing up to this day, and good art participates in and extends these traditions. Similarly, criticism's job is to uphold these traditions and protect them from encroachments from commercialism, political posturing, and vulgarity.

• There are a finite number of good texts (a notion now often tied to "the canon" of texts traditionally taught). The closer that a text comes to achieving an ideal unity, where each element contributes to an overall effect, the more worthy it is of discussion.

• Studying literature is an intrinsically edifying process. It hones the sensibilities and discrimination of students and sets them apart from the unreflective masses.

• The "cream rises," and works of genius will eventually be "vindicated by posterity."

• There is a firm and fast distinction between "high" art and popular art.

• Good art reflects unchanging, universal human issues, experiences, and values.

• Technical definitions and analyses are vital to understanding literature. The text's relationship to a world that extends beyond it is of little interest.

Criticisms Sometimes Made of New Criticism:

• Its emphases on technique, unity of effect, and the autotelic status of art works best on the lyric poem, and it has problems with larger, more historically recent forms like the novel.

• It makes the Western tradition out to be more unified than it is by ignoring diversity and contradictory forces within it, and more monadic than it is by ignoring the exchange between non-western and western cultures (Aristotle, for instance, central to new critical concepts, was introduced to medieval Europe via the Islamic world).

• It does not acknowledge that artistic standards of value are variable and posterity is fickle. Particular pieces of art are viewed as important because they do important cultural work, represent values that segments of the culture (say editors and English professors) believe are of vital import, or help us understand our history.

• The values New Critics celebrated were neither unchanging nor universal, but instead reflected their own, historically and experientially specific concerns, values and ambitions.

• The context is just as important as form to understanding a work of art.