



A NOTE ON THE NEW CRITICISM

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One of the most influential movements in modern critical scholarship, the New Criticism is a philosophy of literary interpretation that stresses the importance of studying literary texts as complete works of art in themselves. Although the term New Criticism was first coined in the nineteenth century, it was not until American critic and poet John Crow Ransom, founder of the Kenyon Review wrote a book titled *The New Criticism* (1941) that it became established in common academic and literary usage. In essence, the New Critics were reacting against established trends in American criticism, arguing for the primacy of the literary text instead of focusing on interpretations based on context. However, as René Wellek has noted in various essays detailing the principles of New Criticism, proponents of this theory had many differences among them, and beyond the importance the New Critics afforded the literary text itself, there were many differences in the way they approached critical study of literary texts. Wellek writes that among the growing number of New Critics in the 1930s, there were few that could be easily grouped together. For example, he puts Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren among the leaders of what he calls the “Southern Critics.” Mostly, they are grouped together due to their reaction against previously established schools of criticism, such as impressionist criticism, the humanist movement, the naturalist movement, and the Marxists, and the fact that many of them taught at Southern universities at the time they created the theory of New Criticism. In addition to rallying against traditional modes of literary interpretations, the most significant contribution made by the New Critics, according to Wellek, was the success with which they established criticism itself as a major academic discipline.

New criticism first started as movement replacing the bio-critical and historical methods that dominated literary studies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In these methods instead of the text itself, the biographical- historical contexts of the text were examined whereas the text is the sole evidence for interpreting it. The life and times of the author, may be of interest to the historian, but not necessarily to the critic. The text ought not to be confused with its origins:





The intentional fallacy, Wimsatt together with M.C. Beardsley in the essay 'The Intentional Fallacy' delivered a resounding blow to the expressive theory by arguing that the quest for the author's intentions had nothing to do with literary criticism. The internationalist position, Wimsatt and Beardsley declared was a Romantic fallacy, consistent only with the conviction that poetry is to be approached as the efflux of a noble soul. Knowledge of the author's intentions was neither available nor desirable. ⁱ

The characteristic method of the New Criticism to have a 'close reading' of the text is based on the view that the literary work is a self-sufficient, autonomous object whose success or failure, charm or lack of it are to be sought within the work itself. The merit of a literary work is to be discerned in its language and structure not outside it in the mind of the writer or in response of the reader. What is more important is the text not the writer nor the reader. The text was there before the reader came to it and it will be there after he leaves it. New criticism strongly reacts against the old historical and biographical approach in literary criticism. It becomes a glorious substitute for the moribund historicism and morbid biographical criticism. It proves hostile to the Victorian and neo-humanist emphasis on the moral uses of literature, the academic interest in historical and literary tradition, and the biography of the author and willingness of the impressionists to make each of literary experience an odyssey of the critic's personality, for according to Cleanth Brooks "a thesis presented eloquently and persuasively is not necessarily the same thing as a poem". Eliot, its seminal mind, has told that "poetry is not an expression of personality...but a medium". In their reaction against the historical approach, the New Critics charge it with the commission of number of fallacies, chiefly, "the intentional fallacy"- the historical critic's tendency to accept the writer's intention or plan of work, as this intention is studied externally of the work itself-and the affective fallacy- the historical critic's tendency to equate the meaning of the work and its value with the intensity of the emotional response of the audience to it. This fallacy would later be repudiated by theorists from the reader-response school of literary theory. Ironically, one of the leading theorists from this school, Stanley Fish, was himself trained by New Critics. Fish criticizes Wimsatt and Beardsley in his essay "Literature in the Reader" (1970).ⁱⁱ

The hey-day of the New Criticism in American high schools and colleges was the Cold War decades between 1950 and the mid-seventies, doubtless because it offered a relatively straightforward and politically uncontroversial approach to the teaching of literature. Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction* both became staples during this era.



Studying a passage of prose or poetry in New Critical style required careful, exacting scrutiny of the passage itself. Formal elements such as rhyme, meter, setting, characterization, and plot were used to identify the theme of the text. In addition to the theme, the New Critics also looked for paradox, (a paradox is a statement that, despite apparently sound reasoning from true premises, leads to a self-contradictory or a logically unacceptable conclusion. Some logical paradoxes are known to be invalid arguments but are still valuable in promoting critical thinking.ⁱⁱⁱ), ambiguity, (Ambiguity is a type of uncertainty of meaning in which several interpretations are plausible. It is thus an attribute of any idea or statement whose intended meaning cannot be definitively resolved according to a rule or process with a finite number of



steps.

Sir John Tenniel's illustration of the Caterpillar for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is noted for its ambiguous central figure, whose head can be viewed as being a human male's face with a pointed nose and pointy chin or being the head end of an actual caterpillar, with the first two right "true" legs visible.^{iv})

irony, (from Ancient Greek εἰρωνεία (eirōneía), meaning "dissimulation, feigned ignorance"^v, in its broadest sense, is a rhetorical device, literary technique, or event in which what appears, on the surface, to be the case, differs radically from what is actually the case. Irony may be divided into categories such as verbal, dramatic, and situational. Verbal, dramatic, and situational irony are often used for emphasis in the assertion of a truth. The ironic form of simile, used in sarcasm, and some forms of litotes can emphasize one's meaning by the deliberate use of language which states the opposite of the truth, denies the contrary of the truth, or drastically and obviously understates a factual connection.^{vi}) and tension (is a feeling of pleasurable fascination and excitement mixed with apprehension, tension, and anxiety developed from an unpredictable, mysterious, and rousing source of entertainment. The term most often refers to an audience's perceptions in a dramatic work.) to help establish the single best and most unified interpretation of the text.





Although the New Criticism is no longer a dominant theoretical model in American universities, some of its methods (like close reading) are still fundamental tools of literary criticism, underpinning a number of subsequent theoretic approaches to literature including post structuralism, deconstruction theory, and reader-response theory.

New Criticism attempts to be a science of literature, with a technical vocabulary. Working with patterns of sound, imagery, narrative structure, point of view, and other techniques discernible on close reading of the text, they seek to determine the function and appropriateness of these to the self-contained work. Basically speaking, New Criticism attempted to settle a scientific method of interpretation and evaluation literary texts.

In its fundamental aesthetic theory, the New criticism ultimately derives from Aristotle with his emphasis upon the 'form' or 'structure' as opposed to Plato's emphasis upon content and social and moral effect. However, the immediate sources of the New Criticism can be located in the late eighteenth century in Kant and in the nineteenth century in Coleridge. From Kant's *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* comes the inspiration for the formalist concept that art can stimulate a special kind of cognition, which is wholly different from the cognition based on logical reasoning. I.A. Richards differentiates between the 'referential language' of science and the 'emotive language' of poetry, which does not make statements but pseudo-statements.

Richards explains: "We may either use words for the sake of the references they promote or we may use them for the sake of the attitudes and emotions which ensue". Science uses words literally and poetry uses words figuratively. For instances when a zoologist uses the word 'toad', the word instantly recalls or refers to the object toad. But the word 'toad' in one of Philip Larkin's poems is a symbol for the grinding monotony of daily work. It is something similar to the distinction, the deconstructionist critic, Paul de Man makes between the 'literal' and the 'figural' in language. Poetry always uses words for a different purpose. Words instead of referring directly to an object evoke an emotion. Richards calls such poetic use of words 'Emotive'. He further states that science makes statements whereas poetry makes only "pseudo-statements". A statement says something and is justified by its correspondence in a highly technical sense, with the fact to which it points. But a pseudo-statement is never literally true. Its primary purpose is to evoke an emotion or attitude of mind which the poet intends by the metaphorical use of language (Chandra and Samy 34-35).

J.C.Ransom, the apostle of New Criticism, affirms the same view in *The World's Body*: "over every poem is a sign which reads: this road does not go through to action: fictitious". This is tantamount to Coleridge's definition of the poem as "that species of composition which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for it immediate object pleasure, not truth" (*Biographia Literaria*).





In his first work, *God Without Thunder* (1930) and in *The World's Body* (1938), Ransom differentiates between science and poetry, and points out that the scientist regards the myth as lies, or at best incorrect attempts to explain the natural phenomena, while poet sees myths as symbolic representation of particular truths. Science may be clear about general principles, but it ignores particular matters so necessary for poetry. Both poets and scientists see the actual world, but poetry sees objects as actual wholes, while science sees them as specimens of a type. Both the poet and scientists are moved by curiosity, by a desire to know, but the scientist is more easily satisfied. The scientist is satisfied by merely by the externals which enable him to clarify the object and put it to practical use; the poet wants to know the object as it is in itself without any desire to put it to practical use. Science has only surface knowledge and so it sees things as 'thin', while poetry contemplates the 'inner essence', and sees things as 'thick'. So, the New Criticism believes science to be opposite of poetry (Tilak 38).

Science says things explicitly, directly, simply, in a notational language whereas poetry expresses itself paradoxically, ironically, indirectly, obliquely.

From Coleridge, the single greatest influence upon the New Criticism comes the emphasis upon the artist's imagination as the power to vivify experience and fuse discrete and apparently incongruous combinations of materials into poetry. In his viewpoint, poetry differs from a legitimate poem in that it is a special handling of knowledge, in which nothing is super-added and every one of its characteristics grows out of its whole nature and is an integral part of it. Poetry does not yield the knowledge consisting of message, snippets of doctrine etc. It offers its special kind of knowledge if we submit ourselves to the progressive, subtle impact of the poem as a whole. Cleanth Brooks condemns the conventional idea of the form as mere envelope for some valuable ethical or psychological content, as a mere ornament or a dead-husk. New Criticism has no faith in the form-content dualism. Poetry has a characteristic structure and yields a characteristic knowledge. We lose the value of poetic knowledge in losing the perspective that the poetic form gives. Cleanth Brooks defines this 'structure' in his *Well Wrought Urn* thus: "The structure meant is a structure of meanings, evaluations and interpretations and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes and meanings... It is a positive unity" (*Well Wrought urn*). And he also insists that "the poet must perforce dramatize the oneness of experience". To revert to the conventional form-content dualism is to fall victim to the "heresy of paraphrase", with its implication of a logical structure, detachable from a poem. R. P Warren expresses the same view when he says, "poetry does not inhere in any particular element but depends upon the set of relationship, the structure, which we call the poem" and a "poem to be good must earn itself". Blackmur's opinion also says – "poetry is life at the remove of form and meaning;





not life lived but life framed and identified” (The Double Agent). Joel Spingarn, the pioneer of the New Criticism says that style cannot be dissociated from the art.

It is the presence in poetry of a structure such as this that accounts for the New Critics’ choice of key-terms like “ambiguity”, paradox, tension, metaphor, irony, gesture, objective correlative. William Empson, the dissector of ambiguity, defines it in his *The Seven types of Ambiguity* as, “any verbal nuance however slight, which gives room for alternative reaction to the same piece of language”. For Cleath Brooks, the proselytizer of the New Criticism in the streets, the paradox springs from the very nature of poetry. It is appropriate and inevitable to poetry. The truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox.

Brooks begins his essay, *The Language of Paradox*, with a remarkable incisiveness and reasoned assurance: “Few of us are prepared to accept the statement that the language of poetry is the language of paradox. Paradox is the language of sophistry, hard, bright, witty; it is hardly the language of soul”. Claiming that our prejudices regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional and never profound, we think great poetry cannot be written in this mode. Yet Brooks’ assertion is no way ambiguous when he says: “Yet there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be apprehended only in terms of paradox”. The only answer to the question where from does a poem gets its power is: “It gets it, it seems to me, from the paradoxical situation out of which the poem arises” (Singh 49).

Metaphor is a device for expanding meaning; it can help to achieve richness and subtlety of implication. The poet must use analogy and metaphor, and as I.A. Richards has pointed out, there are subtle and complex states of emotions which cannot be communicated without the use of metaphor. The use of metaphor forces the poet to resort to the use of paradox, for figures of speech in their very nature imply the figuring of one thing or concept through another, even its opposite. A metaphor is a shift, a carrying over of a word from its normal use to a new use. Robert Frost has made the point that poetry is fundamentally a metaphor.

For Allen Tate, the meaning of poetry is its “tension”, the full organized body of all extension and intention that we can find in it. In *Tension and Poetry*, 1938, according to Pritchard, Tate has developed a “kinetic explanation of the poem in contrast to Ransom’s relatively static structure and texture”. To examine the poem as a whole, the result of the union of texture and structure, is the duty of a critic. Poetry has two meanings: denotative and connotative. “To indicate the denotative aspect of language, Tate use the term extension; to denote its





connotative aspect, intension. The equilibrium of these two forces in tension gives poetry its meaning” (Tilak 41).

R.P. Blackmur is fond of finding gestures in words. According to him, “language is made of words, and gesture is made of motion”. He argues, “words are made of motion, made of action or response”, and gesture is mad of language- made of language beneath or beyond or alongside of the language off words”. “when the language of words fails we resort to the language of gesture... when the language of words most succeeds it becomes gesture in its words”. Gesture animates language. “Language as gesture creates meaning as conscience creates judgment by feeling the pang, the inner bite of thing forced together. This “gesture” he argues, is of great “structural importance in poetry” (Tilak., 96).

T. S Eliot is one of the brilliant ornaments as well as founders of this movement. Eliot defined criticism as a rational analysis of literature. He is an analytical critic who rejected impressionistic criticism. Eliot, like his contemporary I.A. Richards, sought to elevate criticism to the level of objectivity in science. This attitude prompted Eliot to reject both liberalism and romanticism. His essay, “Tradition and Individual Talent”, is among the scriptures of the New criticism. In it he sowed the seeds of a revolution in criticism and in poetry. The essay advances the following concepts basic to the New Criticism –

- a) Literary tradition is not final and irrevocable but is constantly being rearranged by the appearance of new works; in effect the past culminates in the present and is itself altered by the present.
- b) The artist’s experience, real or imagined, is finally concentrated in his work, the work itself, not the artist, is the readers’ proper concern.
- c) Art is not an expression of personality, but an expression of a particular medium.

I. A Richards is perhaps, the prime source for the scientism that paradoxically pervades formalist criticism in its vocabulary and method, despite the avowed opposition to science by the movement. He positively states that the task of criticism is “to recall that poetry is the supreme use of language and to explore, with thoroughness, the intricacies of the modes of language as working modes of mind”. Thus, his contribution lies in the investigation of meaning and in the scrupulous explications of poem as is evident in the work, for instance, of Empson and Blackmur. In his two key-works Principles of Literary Criticism and Practical Criticism, he stresses the method of close textual analysis as the basis for interpretation and judgment. So, the most important features of the New criticism is its tremendous concentration on the text. All the new critics give importance to the close reading of the text. They study the interrelations of meaning of the most subtle kind, the minutest elements of structure and the oblique





suggestions and overtones. So, minute accuracy, with greater subtlety and penetrating is essential in the reading of the text.

But the analysis of a work of art is not an easy job. It needs a lot of practice and scholarship too. Cleanth Brooks makes this point clear: “very frankly my basic concern has been to read the poem not to seek out historical allusions. But an honest concern with the text characterizes or ought to characterize the work of both scholar and critic”. Thus, literary criticism and literary scholarship are therefore, natural allies in the concern to understand the poem.

The New Criticism is also called Ontological Criticism, Contextual Criticism and Intrinsic Criticism. Ontological suggests the formalistic view of the literary work as an objective structure of meanings with its own separate existence. A poem should not mean, but be; contextual implies the belief in the work as a closed world; and intrinsic explicates the conclusion that the work itself contains all the material and information necessary for its understanding and evolution.

We have seen that the New Criticism is a revolt probably necessary against irrelevant historicism. Although its principal practitioners differ, among themselves, they tend to agree that a work of literary art exists in its own right (autotelic), and that whatever historical or social interest it has, must always be subordinate to its avowed or implicit aesthetic intention. They assume that any moral imperative in a work of literature is not simultaneous with the act of creation, the being a major human activity valid in its own right. Ethical implications emerge only after the work is done and are not necessarily parts of the imaginative and shaping process. Since, the New Critic’s primary assumption is that a text ‘worth reading’ must be richly and closely scanned; he is pre-occupied with poetry rather than prose. The New Criticism is an electric criticism confining to poetry and especially it works best with Yeats-Eliot school of modern poetry, and with the result it has set other literary forms like novel, drama, etc aside, confining only to shorter forms, that too in a specified period. The most simplistic definitions of New Criticism identify it as a critical movement that propagates the idea of “art for art's sake.” Yet, according to Gerald Graff, Wellek, and others, the New Critics did concern themselves with the history and context of a work of literature. For them, to truly understand a work of literature, it was important to “embrace a total historical scheme,” using it as the standard against which one judges a literary text. But in contrast to traditional literary criticism, which emphasized the context and background of a text almost as much as the text itself, the New Critics argued that literary texts were complete in and of themselves. Additionally, theories of New Criticism elevate the role of criticism in academics—according to them, criticism is crucial to help maintain poetry and language, and in aiding their development, the New Critics





propose, criticism is really an integral part of social development. Most studies of New Criticism identify it as a formalist mode of critical interpretation, focusing on a close reading of the technicalities, structure, themes, and message of the literary text. Many of the literary qualities held in high esteem by the New Critics were first espoused in the prose works of Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the New Critics considered his work on critical theory as a fundamental starting point in their principles of literary criticism. One of the most well-known texts detailing New Criticism theory was published by Cleanth Brooks in 1947, titled *The Well-Wrought Urn*. In this work, Brooks, in addition to articulating the theories of New Criticism, also interprets many seminal poetic texts using the principles of the New Critics.

Although New Critics applied their principles of literary study to many genres in literature, they held poetry in high regard, viewing it as the best exemplification of the literary values they espoused. Among the American New Critics, a nucleus of writers and critics, including Penn Warren, Ransom, and Tate set about defining their notion of a literary aesthetic, especially as it related to poetry, during the 1920s. They published their views in a bi-monthly literary review called *The Fugitive*, and worked to create what they believed was a literary renaissance in the South, a view of writing and studying poetry that they saw as the essence of modernism, and a sustained and valid response to the traditionally sentimental literary conventions of the South. In later years, the New Critics expanded their definition of the poetic aesthetic, theorizing that poetry, as a work of art, is the ultimate form of communication, complete in meaning and form in itself. One of the most influential writers of New Criticism poetic theory was I. A. Richards—his book *Practical Criticism* (1929) detailed experiments in critical interpretations of poetry in which students were asked to study texts of poems with no accompanying information on the author, or even the title of the works. An unexpected result of the wide variety of student responses was a realization regarding the importance of teaching the act of critical thinking and interpretation. For later New Critics, including William Empson, it was this, the study of language and form that became the subject of his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), a work in which he explored the development of systematic modes of literary interpretation.

New Criticism continues to be studied as part of twentieth-century formalist theories of literature. In his essay outlining the history and development of the New Criticism, John R. Willingham points out that although the proponents of New Criticism are considered creators of a modernist mode of literary interpretation, many of their theories derive from earlier poetic principles, such as those articulated by Coleridge. As a literary movement, New Criticism achieved its most popularity in the 1940s, and a large number of periodicals espousing these ideas began to be published at that time, including *Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and





others. Established journals also eagerly accepted many New Critics as contributors, making criticism itself a dominant field of study in the classroom. In a few decades, however, especially in the 1970s, the New Criticism began waning in popularity, and in fact, was rejected as being “intellectually naïve and methodologically fruitless” writes Willingham. The main charge against the New Critics was their insistence on disregarding historical and biographical information in the study of a literary text, and the stress they placed on the “correct” reading of a text. Their method of critical study was perceived as being too restrictive, and their demands on the reader seen as too authoritarian. More recent evaluations of the New Criticism have defended their original intent—to refocus attention on the literary work itself, rather than the writer or even the reader. In this, concludes Willingham, the sustaining principle advocated by the New Critics was their insistence that “literature requires and deserves responsible reading and readable response.”

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^{iv}

"And do you see its long nose and chin? At least, they *look* exactly like a nose and chin, that is don't they? But they really *are* two of its legs. You know a Caterpillar has got *quantities* of legs: you can see more of them, further down." Carroll, Lewis. *The Nursery "Alice"*. Dover Publications (1966), p 27.

^v

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