

Lecture Series on Contemporary Theories: Introduction Lecture 7

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The New Critics

New Critics focused their attention on the variety and degree of certain literary devices, specifically metaphor, irony, tension, and paradox.

The New Critics emphasized “close reading” as a way to engage with a text, and paid close attention to the interactions between form and meaning.

They did away with biographical and psychological criticism.

The New Critics

New Critics believed the structure and meaning of the text were intimately connected and should not be analyzed separately.

In order to bring the focus of literary studies back to analysis of the texts, they aimed to exclude the reader's response, the author's intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias from their analysis.

The New Critics

Although the New Critics were never a formal group, an important inspiration was the teaching of John Crowe Ransom of Kenyon College, whose students, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren would go on to develop the aesthetics that came to be known as the New Criticism.

The New Critics

In 1946, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley published a classic and controversial New Critical essay entitled “The Intentional Fallacy,” in which they argued strongly against the relevance of an author's intention, or “intended meaning” in the analysis of a literary work.

In another essay, “The Affective Fallacy,” Wimsatt and Beardsley also discounted the reader's personal/emotional reaction to a literary work as a valid means of analyzing a text.

The New Critics

Basically, the New Critics advocated close reading of a text, analyze the play of literary devices, to arrive at the “literariness” (Roman Jakobson) of the piece of literature, i.e., the quality that makes literature a piece of art.

The New Critics

Among the British New Critics were T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, and William Empson.

Eliot articulated a sense of literary tradition that wrenched criticism away from historical and biographical assessment.

In I. A. Richards's 1929 work *Practical Criticism*, the notion of criticism was allied with careful or "close" readings of poetic works. Richards used his Cambridge Honors students' responses to poetry to reveal the reading deficiencies of ostensibly well-trained readers.

The New Critics

These misreadings allowed him to distinguish four distinct meanings that the critic needed to draw out in order to understand a poem:

Sense (literal meaning), Feelings (emotional meaning), Tone (the writer's attitude towards the reader), and Intention (what the writer wants to say).

Such an emphasis on reading as a practice, whose focus was to be directed solely upon formal aspects of the literary object, would become a key trait of New Critical thought.

The New Critics

In the 1920s, Richards had defined the poem as an autonomous and organic being whose unity as an aesthetic object was essential to its study.

In the 1930s and 1940s, critics based in the American South would develop this idea further.

(Some of the content has been taken from open sources on Internet)