

Literary Theory Sample Notes

New Criticism

New Criticism was a formalist movement in literary theory that dominated American literary criticism during the mid-20th century. It emphasized the close reading of texts, especially poetry, to understand how a work functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. The movement focused on the analysis of language, imagery, and the emotional or intellectual tensions within a text. The term "New Criticism" originated from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book of the same name.

The methodology of New Criticism was heavily influenced by I.A. Richards, whose works *Practical Criticism* and *The Meaning of Meaning* introduced a systematic and scientific approach to analyzing literature. T.S. Eliot's critical essays, including *Tradition and the Individual Talent* and *Hamlet and His Problems*, were equally influential. Eliot's ideas on the "theory of impersonality" and the "objective correlative" became foundational to the movement. His critical judgments—such as his preference for metaphysical poets and his insistence on the impersonality of poetry—shaped the canon of New Criticism.

The movement developed in response to earlier approaches, particularly the philological and literary history schools, which focused on etymology, comparative sources, and authors' biographical contexts. New Critics argued that such methods distracted from the intrinsic qualities of the text. They also opposed the literary appreciation school, which emphasized subjective admiration and moral elevation, viewing it as excessively Romantic and lacking systematic rigor.

Central to New Criticism was the belief in textual autonomy, where a work of literature should be analyzed independently of external influences such as the author's intentions, historical context, or reader response. The movement emphasized close reading to reveal the interplay of language, structure, and imagery, underscoring the inseparable connection between a text's form and meaning. Poetry, with its ambiguity, irony, and paradox, was particularly suited to this analytical approach.

New Criticism's major contributors included I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, William Empson, Robert Penn Warren, William K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley, R.P. Blackmur, and René Wellek.

The Fugitives, a group of poets and literary scholars at Vanderbilt University, overlapped with the New Critics. Publishing *The Fugitive* (1922–1925), they included figures like Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and Warren. Their poetry adhered to traditional prosody and often reflected themes from the rural South, laying the groundwork for modern Southern literature.

New Criticism, which flourished from the 1930s to the 1960s, sought to establish a systematic and objective method for analyzing literature. While its influence waned with the rise of structuralism, deconstruction, and reader-response theories, its emphasis on close reading and textual analysis remains a cornerstone of modern literary studies.

Ivor Armstrong Richards (1893–1979), known as I.A. Richards, was an influential English educator, literary critic, poet, and rhetorician. His pioneering work laid the foundations of New Criticism, a formalist movement in literary theory that focused on the close reading of texts, especially poetry, to explore how literature functions as a self-contained aesthetic object. Richards' innovative ideas not only revolutionized literary criticism but also advanced rhetorical and linguistic studies.

Richards authored several landmark works that shaped the critical landscape. *The Foundations of Aesthetics* (1922), co-written with C.K. Ogden, examined the interplay between art and aesthetic experience. In *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), also co-authored with Ogden, Richards explored how language influences thought and the role of symbolism in communication. His *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) introduced essential notions of irony, tension, and balance, distinguishing poetic language from other forms of expression. In *Practical Criticism* (1929), Richards conducted an experiment by providing students with 13 anonymous poems and asking them to interpret the texts. This study revealed the variety of misreadings and underscored the challenges readers face when responding to literature without context or authorial background. His rhetorical theories culminated in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936), where he delved into the nuances of language's influence on persuasion and understanding.

Richards contributed key theoretical frameworks to literary studies. He posited that the meaning of a word is determined by four interrelated aspects: sense, feeling, tone, and intention. These elements highlight the complexity of language and its role in

conveying nuanced meanings. Richards also introduced the concept of "pseudo-statement" to distinguish between scientific and poetic uses of language. While scientific statements are verifiable, poetic language engages emotional and imaginative truths, which are not verifiable in the scientific sense but hold significant aesthetic and emotional value. Additionally, he coined the term "feedforward," which emphasizes anticipating the impact of one's words by acting as one's own critic. This concept encourages writers to refine their communication to achieve clarity and effectiveness.

One of Richards' most enduring contributions is the "semantic triangle," developed in collaboration with Ogden. This model explains the relationship between words, their meanings, and the objects or concepts they represent. The three components of the triangle are the symbol (word), referent (actual object or idea), and thought or reference (the mental concept linking the two). This framework clarified how individuals derive meaning from language, emphasizing the interplay between linguistic symbols and human perception.

Richards' influence extended deeply into New Criticism, a movement that dominated mid-20th-century literary studies. New Critics, including John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks, emphasized close reading to explore the complexities of literary texts. They focused on elements such as paradox, irony, and reconciliation of opposites, analyzing the interplay of language and meaning without relying on authorial intent or external context. Prominent works like W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's essays *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946) and *The Affective Fallacy* (1949) challenged the reliance on authorial purpose and reader response, advocating for a text-centered approach. Their assertion that "a poem should not mean but be" encapsulated the movement's principles.

While New Criticism emphasized poetic language's complexity, the Chicago School offered an alternative perspective. Grounded in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the Chicago School prioritized structural and mimetic aspects of literature, viewing texts as artistic wholes. Critics such as R.S. Crane and Elder Olson emphasized the integration of systematic theory, historical context, and close reading. They argued that literary criticism should address textual and generic intentions rather than focusing solely on poetic language.

Richards' intellectual legacy is profound, particularly in his ability to merge empirical studies with theoretical insights. His emphasis on detailed textual analysis, objectivity, and the intricate relationship between language and thought continues to shape modern literary criticism and pedagogy. His student, William Empson,

furthered these ideas in works like *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), which demonstrated the richness of literary texts through New Critical methodologies. Richards' theories remain essential for understanding literature's aesthetic and communicative dimensions, bridging the gap between language, meaning, and human experience.

Major Thinkers:

John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974)

John Crowe Ransom was an influential American poet, educator, literary critic, essayist, and editor. Recognized as one of the founders of the New Criticism movement, he emphasized analyzing literary works as independent entities, focusing on their structure and meaning. As a professor at Kenyon College, Ransom played a key role in shaping literary discourse as the founding editor of *The Kenyon Review*, a prominent literary journal.

Ransom was also an accomplished poet, earning widespread acclaim for his thoughtful and formally structured verse. His first poetry collection, *Poems about God* (1919), received praise from notable poets such as Robert Frost and Robert Graves. Additionally, he was a founding member of *The Fugitives*, a group of Southern writers and poets dedicated to preserving and celebrating traditional Southern culture. He also edited the group's magazine.

Major Works

1. **Poems about God** (1919): A collection of poems exploring philosophical and theological themes.
2. **God without Thunder** (1930): An exploration of modernity, tradition, and religion.
3. **The World's Body** (1938): A critical work analyzing the relationship between art, poetry, and philosophy.
4. **The New Criticism** (1941): A foundational text that defined and advocated for the New Critical approach to literature.

Key Concepts

Ransom categorized poetry into three distinct types, emphasizing different aspects of poetic expression:

1. **Physical Poems:** Focus on sensory elements like rhythm, sound, and imagery.
2. **Platonic Poems:** Explore abstract themes and philosophical ideas.
3. **Metaphysical Poems:** Synthesize sensory elements with intellectual depth, creating a balance between form and meaning.

These classifications reflect Ransom's belief in the complexity of poetry and the importance of analyzing its multiple dimensions.

Cleanth Brooks (1906–1994)

Cleanth Brooks was a prominent American literary critic and a key figure in the development of New Criticism. Known for his innovative approach to poetry analysis, Brooks emphasized the importance of studying the language, structure, and inherent tensions within a poem, treating it as a self-contained and unified work of art. His concept of the "well-wrought urn" symbolizes the organic unity of poetry, where all elements work together harmoniously.

Major Works

1. **Understanding Poetry** (1938): Co-authored with Robert Penn Warren, this anthology serves as a foundational text for teaching the New Critical method of close reading.
2. **Modern Poetry and the Tradition** (1939): Explores the evolution of modern poetry and its departure from earlier traditions.
3. **The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry** (1947): Brooks's most influential work, it outlines key principles of New Criticism and includes the famous chapter "The Heresy of Paraphrase."

Major Terms and Concepts

1. **The Heresy of Paraphrase:**
 - Introduced in *The Well-Wrought Urn*, this concept asserts that the meaning of poetry cannot be reduced to a paraphrased summary. According to Brooks, a poem's meaning is inseparable from its form and structure.
 - He described a poem as "a simulacrum of reality," emphasizing that it provides an experience rather than a mere explanation or abstraction of it.
 - Brooks highlighted the significance of structure, tension, balance, and irony, urging critics to focus on how a poem achieves its effect rather than on its thematic statement.
2. **Unity and Organic Nature:**