

## Knowledge Article

### New Criticism: Affective and Intentional Fallacies

New Criticism was a school of literary criticism that emerged in the 1940s in southern American universities such as Vanderbilt University. It was the successor to earlier literary criticism schools such as modernism and formalism. It was also influenced by the critical writings of T. S. Eliot, who emphasized in essays such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Hamlet and His Problems" that a work of art or literature must be "objective" and "impersonal." Famous critics in the New Criticism school were Allan Tate, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, William Empson, Monroe Beardsley, F. R. Leavis, and William K. Wimsatt.

New Critics took their main focus from formalism—the idea that a work of art or literature must be appreciated or critiqued on the basis of its form. New Critical approaches were usually applied to poems because fiction was not as easy to analyze in purely formal terms. The New Critics suggested that critics should concern themselves only with the physical or formal characteristics that make up a poem. Formal characteristics include irony, internal tension, paradox, ambiguity (where the meaning of a text is not overt or where it is conflicted), word choice, connotative and denotative meanings, metaphors, similes, rhyme schemes, poetic structure, and so on. New Criticism involves what is called a "close reading" of a text—analyzing a passage with regard to all its details and their interrelations.

In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson suggests that for New Critics, the poem is a "timeless, autonomous (self-sufficient) verbal object." Its interpretation and importance based on historical or cultural contexts may change, but its formal characteristics remain the same. For example, the story of Rapunzel may have been considered romantic in the past, but in modern times it is considered anti-feminist because the princess does nothing but wait in a tower for the prince to save her. In other words, its meaning has changed, but the story itself hasn't.

The job of the New Critic is to study how all the formal characteristics of a literary work, such as irony or metaphor, work together or interact with each other to create and maintain the "organic unity," or overall theme, of the text. For example, a New Critic studying the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood would pay no attention to its historical background (the fear of wolves in rural Europe, the abduction and killing of children in medieval Germany, etc.) or authorial intent (the intent of the Grimm brothers, who published a well-known version of the story). New Critics also would not consider a reader's personal response important in the analysis. Instead, New Critics might study the symbols and word patterns (the importance of the color red, the repetition of phrases such as "What big eyes you have. What big teeth you have") to try to understand the work's overall theme. (Red might symbolize danger, while Red Riding

Hood's constant questioning and disregard for her mother's warnings suggest willfulness and curiosity.) Putting these elements together, a New Critic will conclude that the overall theme of the tale is that willfulness and excessive curiosity in young girls will lead them to danger.

Two very important critical concepts of the New Criticism school are the affective fallacy and intentional fallacy. The two terms were coined by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in 1946 and 1949 respectively.

With regard to intentional fallacy, Wimsatt and Beardsley stated, "Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle." That is, to discern the true meaning of a text, the critic should not consult the thought, opinions, or life story of the author. They give several reasons for their view that criticism that is dependent on the intentions of the author is ineffective.

Wimsatt and Beardsley suggest that the poem itself should show the intention of the author. If not, and a critic must go outside the text to discover the author's intention, then the author failed to show it in the creation of the text itself. According to these New Critics, the text is the most important "object" in literary criticism, and "[j]udging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work. It is only because an artifact works that we infer the intention of an artificer." They also argued that uncovering the true intention of the author or his thoughts or attitude about his work was not always possible for the critic, and so was not required. Finally, they stated that the poem was an independent object that had become "detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it."

At the other end of the spectrum from Wimsatt and Beardsley were those critics who insisted that the true meaning of a literary work could be found in its effect on the reader. In other words, the meaning of a poem is found in the emotions it arouses in the reader. Wimsatt and Beardsley believed this type of criticism was dependent on a fallacy they called the affective fallacy. They stated that this kind of criticism was "confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does)." Their main objection was that criticism dependent on the affective fallacy could never be objective because there would be as many varied interpretations and meanings in a poem as there were readers and critics, who all brought their own life experiences and personal biases to their reading. This kind of criticism was susceptible to emotional subjectivity. The concept of affective fallacy was also a reaction against impressionistic criticism, which held that a literary work could be measured by its power to arouse responses in the reader.

According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, criticism was effective only as long as the critic was able to avoid these fallacies. The theories of Wimsatt and Beardsley and other New Critics were never accepted by all literary critics. However, they were influential in the emergence of many new schools of criticism in the modern era. They were also

instrumental in giving the formal analysis of literary texts widespread acceptability in a broad range of academic fields. Many critics reacted to Wimsatt and Beardsley's criticisms and created countermovements and new schools in the decades that followed, such as reader response criticism, structuralist criticism, deconstruction, and feminist and postcolonial criticism.