

Chapter 3: Unifying the Work

New Criticism/Formalism Theory

English 104: Critical Thinking & Writing About Literature
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THEORY

Brief History & Background

- 1920s – 1960s—dominant mode of criticism/interpretation
- “Ars Poetica”
- John Crowe Ransom: *The New Critics* (1941)
- René Wellek and Robert Penn Warren: *Theory of Literature* (1949)

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Formalistic Theory Principles

- Poem as extraordinary, mysterious object
 - a “palpable” entity of its own
 - three-dimensionality—extension in space and time
- Poem as silent, “unchanging object”
 - motionless
 - experience of the poem is temporal, caught between time and space; poem transcends time
 - exists in the realm of imagination, not science
- Poem as “an organized unity not a meaning”
 - Offers an experience, not a meaning
 - “an experience, not a discussion of an experience” (Lynn)
 - “A poem should not mean / But be” (MacLeish) because meaning is something we impose on the poem

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Formalistic Theory Assumptions

- Poetic Language
 - poetry should be “untrue”
 - don’t use literal language to convey ideas;
 - no truth is told in a scientific or historical way
 - metaphorical language—to evoke emotions or historical ideas or abstractions/concepts
- Objective status
 - art is an *object* of knowledge
 - job of criticism is to establish a POV that is most thorough and deep and rigorous
 - interpretation on the level of science to elevate the status of literary criticism as a legitimate field of study
 - text itself is all the reader should need to know
 - biography & history are useful but not essential (in varying degrees)
- Artistic performance of the work is privileged
- Unified Complexity
 - Be alert to allusion to mythology, literature, history, and religion

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Fallacies

- “The Affective Fallacy”
 - a confusion between the poem and its results
 - individual reader’s response is not too important
 - anticipates Reader-Response criticism
- “The Intentional Fallacy”
 - a confusion between the poem and its origins
 - biographical & historical information doesn’t tell us how to read the poem itself. Only the poem can tell us how to read the poem.

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Formalism’s Terms

- **irony**—work says one thing and *means* another
- **ambiguity**—work says *two* things at once
- **paradox**—work seems to say *opposite* things
- **tension**—work *strains* against its apparent meaning
- **theme**—work’s central subject; work’s larger ideas, abstractions, concepts it conveys
- **objective correlative**—“a set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion” (T.S. Eliot)
- **close reading**—the reader’s activity of paying careful attention to the denotative and connotative use of a work’s language, to a work’s point of view, to other artistic devices
- **explication**—for Formalistic critics (New Critics), it involves an explanation of the artistic *performance* of the work.

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Performing a Formalistic Reading

■ Objectives:

- recover the theme that holds the work's parts together (unified object)
- reveal how the parts relate to the whole (organic unity; unified complexity)
- emphasize shape, structure, and form
- show the writer as craftsman who fashions an artistic object
 - writer is elevated to status of *artisan*, but not on the work's message

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Performing a Formalistic Reading

Method

1. Prepare through copious notes—talking and dialoguing with the text
2. Theoretical awareness—knowing what sort of images to look for in a Formalistic reading.
3. IDENTIFICATION (close reading)
 - Locate complexities (tensions, ironies, paradoxes, oppositions, ambiguities)
4. THEME
 - Ask what *singular idea* or theme resolves these complexities so that the work is a unified whole?
5. EXPLICATION
 - What details support this resolution? (*How* are the parts connected to create a whole?)

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