

An Introduction to Literary Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts and the world around them. Some lenses will be more appropriate for particular works than others at times and it is your job to discern when to use a particular lens. The following theories are just that, *theories*. Approach them as you would a scientist, without any emotional attachment to any particular one. You do not have to believe or agree with a theory to understand and correctly apply it. Your goal is to understand the literary theories below.

New Criticism

✓ New Criticism Explained

➤ The critic's interest should be ultimately focused on the work itself (not the author's intentions, author's bio, when the work was written, nor the reader's response)

➤ Text=Meaning
➤ The purpose is to expose the work's unity and complexity; great literature has elements that support a unifying theme, bring together ambiguities, ironies, and tensions.

✓ Where Did It Come From

➤ From the time of Plato to that of the Romantics, critics focused on finding meaning solely in the text and in adherence to form.

➤ For a brief period starting in the early 19th century (the Romantics) the focus shifted to the author as a genius who saw truths the average person could not.

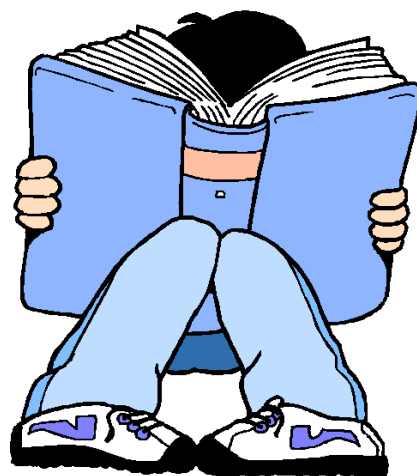
➤ Then back to the text with the New Critics, who saw the text as an objective object whose meaning could be uncovered through study.

➤ TRUTH exists in the text, if one looks hard enough to find it.

➤ New Critics believed that a text was an autotelic artifact, something complete with in itself, written for its own sake, unified in its form and not dependent on its relation to the author's life or intent, history, or anything else.

➤ New Critics believed that a person could evaluate and analyze a text while remaining immune to one's own culture, background, status, and even personality.

➤ For the new critic, it would be wrong to focus on the effect on the reader. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley called the Affective Fallacy--the fallacy of confusing a work of literature with its effects on the reader.



✓ **New Criticism Assumptions**

- The critic's job is to help us appreciate the technique and form of art and the mastery of the artist.
- That the "Western tradition" is an unbroken, internally consistent set of artistic conventions and traditions going back to ancient Greece and continuing up to this day, and that good art participates in and extends these traditions. Similarly, criticism's job is to uphold these traditions and protect them from encroachments from commercialism, political posturing, and vulgarity.
- That there are a finite number of good texts (a notion now often tied to "the canon" of texts traditionally taught). The closer that a text comes to achieving an ideal unity, where each element contributes to an overall effect, the more worthy it is of discussion.
- Studying literature is an intrinsically edifying process. It hones the sensibilities and discrimination of students and sets them apart from the unreflective masses.
- That "cream rises," and works of genius will eventually be "vindicated by posterity."
- That there is a firm and fast distinction between "high" art and popular art.
- That good art reflects unchanging, universal human issues, experiences, and values.
- Technical definitions and analyses are vital to understanding literature. The text's relationship to a world that extends beyond it is of little interest.

✓ **Criticism of New Criticism Theory**

- That it's emphasizes on technique, unity of effect, and the autotelic status of art works best on the lyric poem, but has problems with larger, more historically recent forms like the novel.
- That it makes the Western tradition out to be more unified than it is by ignoring diversity and contradictory forces within it, and more monadic than it is by ignoring the exchange between non-western and western cultures (Aristotle, for instance, central to new critical concepts, was introduced to medieval Europe via the Islamic world).
- That artistic standards of value are variable and posterity is fickle. Particular pieces of art are viewed as important because they do important cultural work, represent values that segments of the culture (say editors and English professors) believe are of vital import, or help us understand our history.
- That the values New Critics celebrated were neither unchanging nor universal, but instead reflected their own, historically and experientially specific concerns, values and ambitions.
- That context is just as important as form to understanding a work of art.



✓ **Example of New Criticism**

- The use of irony in "The Monkey's Paw" is ultimately what makes the story resonate with the reader. Though the protagonists of the story know that the fulfillment of a wish comes at a disastrous price, they still wish for their son to return home to them. The point of climax, pounding the door, serves to

bring home to the reader the consistency of the theme, where at last the couple realizes that some wishes aren't worth the price paid."

✓ **Strategies for New Criticism**

- Determine what opposition or tensions or ambiguities are present.
- Read closely - You can assume that every aspect is carefully calculated to contribute to the work's unity - figures of speech, point of view, diction, recurrent ideas or events.
- Say how the work is unified, how the various elements work to unify it.