

NEW CRITICISM

III B.A. – VI SEMESTER

The Genesis of New Criticism: Foundations and Philosophical Roots

I. Definition and Temporal Scope

New Criticism was an **American and Trans-Atlantic movement** of literary criticism that dominated the academic landscape roughly between the **1920s and the 1960s** (Dr.Jayanta... p. 1). It transformed the study of literature from a historical or biographical exercise into a rigorous, quasi-scientific discipline. At its core, it emphasized the **autonomy of the text**, arguing that a poem or story exists as a self-contained object of beauty, independent of its creator or the era in which it was written.

II. The Naming and Academic Institutionalisation

While the principles of the movement were percolating in the 1920s through the work of I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot, the movement received its "official" name in **1941**. **John Crowe Ransom**, often referred to as the "Philosopher General of the New Criticism," published his seminal work titled *The New Criticism* (Dr.Jayanta... p. 1). Ransom argued that for literature to survive as a serious subject in universities, students must be permitted to "study literature, and not merely *about* literature" (Dr.Jayanta... p. 1). This shifted the focus from external facts (dates, author's letters, political climate) to the **internal mechanics** of the writing itself.

III. Philosophical Motivation: "The Fugitives"

The movement's heart was in the American South, specifically at Vanderbilt University. It emerged from a group of poets and scholars known as "**The Fugitives**" (including Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren) (Dr.Jayanta... p. 1).

- **Refuge from Materialism:** Following the world wars, these critics felt that modern society had become too "materialistic" and "scientific" in a cold, industrial sense.
- **The Aesthetic-Religious Embrace:** They sought an "**aesthetic-religious**" refuge in literature (Dr.Jayanta... p. 1). To them, a poem was not just a document; it was a source of "cultural integrity" that could offer a unified experience of truth that science and history could not provide.

IV. Reactionary Nature: The War Against "Extraneous" Knowledge

New Criticism was a revolutionary reaction against the **historical-biographical criticism** that had dominated the 19th century (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2).

- **Isolation of the Work:** New Critics sought to **isolate the work** from the author's personality and social influences (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2). They believed that knowing an author's childhood trauma or political leanings was a distraction from the "verbal icon" on the page.

- **Against Impressionism:** They also reacted against "impressionistic" criticism—where a critic simply describes how a book makes them *feel*—which they viewed as shallow and arbitrary (Dr.Jayanta... p. 1).
- **The Influence of T.S. Eliot:** Much of this reactionary stance was built on **T.S. Eliot's "Impersonality Theory."** In his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), Eliot argued that the poet's mind is merely a "catalyst" and that the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates (Dr.Jayanta... pp. 2, 4).

V. Influence of British Formalism

Though primarily an American movement, its foundations were laid by British scholars at Cambridge. **I.A. Richards** introduced "**Practical Criticism**" in 1929, where he gave students poems without titles or author names to see if they could interpret them purely based on the words (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2). This practice became the "New Critical" standard: the belief that "the only important materials are the **printed words on the page**" (Dr.Jayanta... p. 4).

VI. Key Foundational Texts

Author	Text	Year	Contribution
I.A. Richards	<i>Practical Criticism</i>	1929	Introduced text-only analysis (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2).
T.S. Eliot	<i>The Function of Criticism</i>	1933	Promoted the "impersonal" text (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2).
John Crowe Ransom	<i>The New Criticism</i>	1941	Coined the movement's name (Dr.Jayanta... p. 1).
Cleanth Brooks	<i>The Well Wrought Urn</i>	1947	Defined poetry through paradox/irony (Dr.Jayanta... p. 5).

The Mechanics of the Text: Fallacies and Linguistic Foundations

The New Critics approached a literary work as a "**Verbal Icon**"—an autonomous, self-contained object that must be studied without reference to outside forces. To protect this autonomy, they identified two major logical errors: the **Intentional Fallacy** and the **Affective Fallacy**.

I. The Guardrails of Objective Criticism: The Two Fallacies

In their seminal essays, **W.K. Wimsatt** and **Monroe Beardsley** argued that for criticism to be objective and "scientific," it must ignore both the origin of the work and its result (Dr.Jayanta... p. 7).

- **The Intentional Fallacy:** This concept posits that it is a mistake to judge a work based on what the author *intended* to say. Once a poem is published, it belongs to the public, not the poet (Dr.Jayanta... p. 8). Relying on an author's diary, letters, or biography to explain a text is seen as an "importation of meaning from outside" (Dr.Jayanta... p. 7).

- **The Affective Fallacy:** This is the "erroneous way of analyzing a work" by focusing on the emotional impact it has on the reader (Dr.Jayanta... p. 8). If a critic judges a poem based on whether it makes them cry or feel inspired, they are practicing "**impressionistic**" **criticism**, which is subjective and unreliable. The New Critics argued that we must focus on what the poem *is*, not what it *does* to our feelings (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9).

II. The Heresy of Paraphrase: Form vs. Content

Cleanth Brooks, in his landmark book *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), introduced the "**Heresy of Paraphrase.**"

- **The Organic Whole:** Brooks argued that a poem is like a living organism or a "well-wrought urn"; you cannot separate the "message" (the content) from the "way it is said" (the form) (Dr.Jayanta... p. 6).
- **The Error of Summary:** To paraphrase a poem—to turn it into a simple prose statement—is to "demolish the parts" and lose the total experience (Dr.Jayanta... p. 6). The meaning of a poem is found in its **unique structure**, not in a moral lesson or a summary of its "plot."

III. The Linguistic Tools: Resolving Internal Conflict

New Critics do not look for a simple, flat meaning. Instead, they look for internal "warfare" within the language of the text. They believe that a great work of art holds opposing forces in a state of "**Organic Unity**" (Dr.Jayanta... p. 3).

- **Paradox:** This is a statement that seems self-contradictory but reveals a deeper truth. Brooks viewed paradox as the "marrow" of poetic language (Dr.Jayanta... p. 6).
- **Irony:** In New Criticism, irony isn't just "saying the opposite of what you mean." It is a "**principle of structure**" where various meanings are held in balance, allowing the poem to resist simple interpretation (Dr.Jayanta... p. 6).
- **Ambiguity:** Popularized by **William Empson** in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), this refers to words or phrases that carry multiple "packed" meanings simultaneously (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2).
- **Tension:** A term often associated with **Allen Tate**, referring to the "pull" between the literal meaning of a word and its metaphorical extensions.

IV. Concepts at a Glance

Concept	Primary Author	Purpose
Intentional Fallacy	Wimsatt & Beardsley	Rejects the author's biography as a source of meaning (Dr.Jayanta... p. 8).

Affective Fallacy	Wimsatt & Beardsley	Rejects the reader's emotions as a standard for quality (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9).
Heresy of Paraphrase	Cleanth Brooks	Claims that "meaning" cannot be separated from "form" (Dr.Jayanta... p. 6).
Ambiguity	William Empson	Focuses on the "packed" multiple meanings in language (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2).
Tension/Irony	Allen Tate / Brooks	Studies how a poem achieves unity through conflict (Dr.Jayanta... p. 6).

Conclusion

By identifying these fallacies and refining these linguistic tools, New Criticism shifted the focus of literary study to the **"words on the page"** (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2). While later theories (like Post-structuralism) would challenge the idea of a "single correct interpretation," the New Critical practice of **Close Reading** remains the foundation of how literature is taught in classrooms today (Dr.Jayanta... p. 10).

The Pillars of New Criticism: Key Figures and Their Impact

1. T.S. Eliot: The Philosopher of Impersonality

Though primarily a poet, Eliot provided the intellectual "building blocks" for the movement (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2). His most famous contribution was the **Theory of Impersonality**.

- **The Catalyst:** In his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot argued that a poet's mind is like a catalyst in a chemical reaction; it helps create the poem but should not be part of the final product (Dr.Jayanta... p. 4).
- **Impersonal Feelings:** He believed poetry is not an "expression of personality" but an "escape from personality." The poet uses language to tap into universal, **impersonal feelings** shared by all humankind (Dr.Jayanta... p. 4).
- **Objective Correlative:** Eliot also introduced the idea that an emotion in art should be expressed through a specific set of objects or events—a "formula" for that particular emotion.

2. I.A. Richards: The Father of Practical Criticism

If Eliot provided the philosophy, Richards provided the method. At Cambridge in the 1920s, he laid the movement's foundation (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2).

- **Practical Criticism (1929):** Richards famously gave students poems without titles or author names, forcing them to focus only on the **"words on the page"** (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2).

- **Psychology of Poetry:** He argued that poetry's purpose is psychological rather than cognitive—it's about how the language organizes our mental state, not just conveying facts (Dr.Jayanta... p. 2).

3. Cleanth Brooks: The Central Architect

Brooks is often called the most important figure for making New Criticism a classroom reality (Dr.Jayanta... p. 5).

- **Interior Life of a Poem:** He shifted focus away from what a poem "meant" to its **interior life**—how it was built (Dr.Jayanta... p. 5).
- **Irony and Paradox:** Brooks believed that the "marrow" of poetry is **Paradox**. For him, a poem isn't a straight line of thought; it's a structure that holds conflicting ideas in balance (Dr.Jayanta... pp. 5-6).
- **Organic Unity:** He championed the idea that a poem is an "organic whole," like a living plant, where the form and the content cannot be separated (Dr.Jayanta... p. 6).

4. W.K. Wimsatt Jr.: The Objective Theoretician

Wimsatt was the movement's most rigorous "policeman," ensuring that criticism remained objective and scientific (Dr.Jayanta... p. 7).

- **The Verbal Icon:** He viewed the poem as a "**verbal icon**"—a self-contained object that exists independently of its creator or its readers (Dr.Jayanta... p. 8).
- **The Fallacies:** Along with Monroe Beardsley, he identified the **Intentional Fallacy** (don't look at the author's intent) and the **Affective Fallacy** (don't look at the reader's emotions) as the two biggest hurdles to honest criticism (Dr.Jayanta... p. 8).

5. R.P. Blackmur: The Master Anatomist

Blackmur was known for his incredible attention to the "surgical" details of a text.

- **Poetic Dissection:** He approached criticism with the skill of an anatomist, performing deep **dissections** of stanzas and individual words to see how they functioned (Dr.Jayanta... p. 7).
- **Language as Gesture:** He believed that the poet controls their material by choosing the "most appropriate words," and that these words create a special kind of "tension" that generates a new language (Dr.Jayanta... p. 6).

Figure	Key Concept	Primary Focus
T.S. Eliot	Impersonality	The poet as a catalyst; separation of man and art.

I.A. Richards	Practical Criticism	Analyzing text without biographical context.
Cleanth Brooks	Paradox & Irony	The poem as an organic, non-paraphrasable unit.
W.K. Wimsatt	The Verbal Icon	Protecting the text from outside "fallacies."
R.P. Blackmur	Precise Language	The "dissection" of words and their technical value.

The Twilight of a Giant: The Criticisms and Legacy of New Criticism

For nearly four decades, New Criticism reigned supreme in the Anglo-American academic world. However, by the **1960s and 1970s**, a new wave of radical theories began to challenge its dominance, eventually leading to its displacement by Post-structuralism, Marxism, and Feminist criticism.

I. The Downfall: Rigidity and Elitism

The decline of New Criticism was not sudden but was driven by a growing sense that the movement had become a "**rigid and structured program**" that was too dogmatic for the changing social landscape of the 1960s (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9).

- **Textual Isolation:** The very thing that made New Criticism successful—its focus on the "words on the page"—eventually became its undoing. Critics argued that by isolating the text from its past and context, the movement became **unhistorical** (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9).
- **The Charge of Elitism:** Because New Criticism required a highly specialized technical vocabulary and a specific background to arrive at the "correct" interpretation, it was perceived as **elitist**. It excluded readers who lacked the specialized training to solve these complex linguistic "puzzles" (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9).
- **A "Historical Necessity" Fades:** As Dr. Jayanta Kar Sharma notes, the movement was a "historical necessity" that served its purpose of bringing order to chaotic critical approaches, but once that order was established, its restrictive nature became a burden (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9).

II. Major Limitations: The Social and Moral Vacuum

The most significant charge against New Criticism was that it "**trivialized**" **literature**. By treating poems like "interpretive puzzles," it stripped them of their human and social power (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9).

- **Ignoring Social Reality:** New Critics intentionally ignored "external influences" such as **gender, race, and social class** (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9). In a world grappling with the Civil Rights movement, Feminism, and the Vietnam War, a theory that refused to discuss politics or social function seemed increasingly irrelevant.

- **The Loss of Human Meaning:** Critics like Gerald Graff argued that this text-isolation destroyed the **moral, political, and personal impact** that literature possesses (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9). Literature was no longer a "man speaking to men" (as Wordsworth claimed) but a "Verbal Icon" to be dissected in a laboratory.
- **Incompatibility with New Perspectives:** The insistence on a single "correct" reading disqualified fruitful perspectives offered by **Psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Post-colonialism**, which sought to understand how literature reflects power and the human subconscious (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9).

III. The Permanent Impact: The Legacy of Close Reading

Despite its downfall as a dominant philosophy, New Criticism left an **"indelible mark"** on the evolution of modern literary criticism (Dr.Jayanta... p. 10). It fundamentally changed the "DNA" of the English department.

- **The Tool of Close Reading:** The most lasting contribution is **Close Reading** (or *explication de texte*). This remains a fundamental tool used by almost all literary critics today, regardless of their theoretical persuasion (Dr.Jayanta... p. 10). Whether a critic is a Feminist or a Marxist, they still use the New Critical method of providing "concrete, specific examples from the text" to validate their arguments (Dr.Jayanta... p. 10).
- **Professionalization of the Discipline:** New Criticism turned English studies into a **serious, academic science** with its own technical vocabulary (irony, paradox, ambiguity, tension) (Dr.Jayanta... p. 9). It moved the field away from mere "book reviewing" toward rigorous scholarship.
- **The Doorway to Theory:** By rejecting the author and focusing on the text, New Criticism opened the door for **Structuralists and Deconstructionists**. While these later groups rejected New Critical principles, they kept many of its practices, such as the belief that meaning is found within the linguistic structure itself (Dr.Jayanta... p. 10).

Conclusion

New Criticism may have "faded out" because it was too narrow to contain the social complexities of the late 20th century, but it is still worthy of **"deep respect"** (Dr.Jayanta... pp. 9-10). It taught the world how to look at a poem as a work of art rather than a historical document. As Dr. Sharma concludes, it shifted the importance from the **Author to the Text**, a move that remains the starting point for almost all modern literary journeys (Dr.Jayanta... p. 10).