

Twentieth Century Schools of Literary Criticism

Russian Formalism

Russian formalism was a school of literary criticism in Russia from the 1910s to the 1930s. It was originated in St. Petersburg through the group OPOYAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language), and in Moscow via the Moscow Linguistic Circle.

Major Figures

Important Formalists included Viktor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynianov, Vladimir Propp, Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsky, and Grigory Gukovsky.

- Formalism viewed literature as a distinct and separate entity, unconnected to historical or social causes or effects.
- It analyzed literature according to devices unique to literary works and focused on the “literariness” of a text: words were not simply substitutes for objects but objects themselves.
- Formalists advanced the concept of *ostranenie*, or defamiliarization, arguing that literature, by calling attention to itself as such, estranged the reader from ordinary experience and made the familiar seem new.
- Formalism’s tendency to collapse form and content is somewhat similar to New Criticism’s approach, though its main influence was on structuralism.

New Criticism

Name given to a style of criticism advocated by a group of academics writing in the first half of the 20th century.

New Criticism, like Formalism, tended to consider texts as autonomous and “closed,” meaning that everything that is needed to understand a work is present within it. The reader does not need outside sources, such as the author’s biography, to fully understand a text; while New Critics did not completely discount the relevance of the author, background, or possible sources of the work, they did insist that those types of knowledge had very little bearing on the work’s merit as literature.

Like Formalist critics, New Critics focused their attention on the variety and degree of certain literary devices, specifically metaphor, irony, tension, and paradox. The New Critics emphasized “close reading” as a way to engage with a text, and paid close attention to the interactions between form and meaning.

Major Figures:

Important New Critics included Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, William Empson, and F.R. Leavis. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley coined the term “intentional fallacy”; other terms associated with New Criticism include “affective fallacy,” “heresy of paraphrase,” and “ambiguity.”

Russian Formalism x New Criticism

Russian Formalism	New Criticism
Russia (1910-1930)	North America (first half of 20 th century)
A text is more important; it is studied independently of the author's intention and historical and cultural context	A text is more important; it is studied independently of the author's intention and historical and cultural context
Focus on poetry.	Focus on poetry.
focus was on the form or structure of a text	form and content of the text are closely connected and cannot be analyzed separately

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Marxist Literary Criticism

Marxist literary criticism type of literary criticism based on the writings of Karl Marx. In its simplest form, Marxist criticism attempts to show the relationship between literature and the social—mainly economic—conditions under which it was produced.

Marx's major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in a society controlled the society.

In Marxist critical thinking, literary texts are one register of the *superstructure*, which is determined by the economic *base* of any given society. Therefore, literary texts are a reflection of the economic base rather than "the social institutions from which they originate" for all social institutions, or, more precisely human—social relationships, are in the final analysis determined by the economic base. According to the Marxists, even literature itself is a social institution and has a specific ideological function, based on the background and ideology of the author.



The English literary critic and cultural theorist Terry Eagleton defines Marxist criticism this way:

“Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and, meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history.”

Major Figures

Important 20th-century Marxist literary critics include Georg Lucács, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams, and Frederic Jameson.

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Structuralism

- A movement of thought in the humanities, widespread in anthropology, linguistics, and literary theory, and influential in the 1950s and '60s.
- It is based primarily on the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure.
- It considers language a system of signs and signification, the elements of which are understandable only in relation to each other and to the system.

The English philosopher, Simon Blackburn, defines structuralism as:

The belief that phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through their interrelations. These relations constitute a structure, and behind local variations in the surface phenomena there are constant laws of abstract structure.

Structuralism in Europe developed, mainly in France and Russia, in the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and the subsequent Prague, Moscow, and Copenhagen schools of linguistics. After World War II, various scholars in the humanities borrowed Saussure's concepts for use in their respective fields.

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss was the first scholar, sparking a widespread interest in structuralism. Structuralism has since been applied in a range of fields, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary criticism, economics, and architecture. Along with Lévi-Strauss, the most prominent thinkers associated with structuralism include linguist Roman Jakobson and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

In literary theory, structuralism challenged the belief that a work of literature reflected a given reality; instead, a text was constituted of linguistic conventions and situated among other texts. Structuralist

critics analyzed material by examining underlying structures, such as characterization or plot, and attempted to show how these patterns were universal and could thus be used to develop general conclusions about both individual works and the systems from which they emerged.

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Feminist Literary Criticism

A literary criticism that is normally seen as an extension of feminism's critique of male power and ideology. It uses the principles and ideology of feminism to critique the language of literature.

Feminist theory emerged from the struggle for women's rights, beginning in the 18th century with Mary Wollstonecraft's publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Important feminist theorists of the 20th century include Betty Friedan, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Elaine Showalter, Carol Gilligan, and Adrienne Rich.

Feminist Literary Criticism seeks to analyze and describe the ways in which literature portrays the narrative of male domination by exploring the economic, social, political, and psychological forces embedded within literature. This way of thinking and criticizing works can be said to have changed the way literary texts are viewed and studied, as well as changing and expanding the canon of what is commonly taught.

Post-Colonial Criticism

Post-Colonial Criticism analyzes the literature produced in countries that were once colonies, especially of European powers such as Britain, France, and Spain. It also looks at the broader interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized by dealing with issues such as identity (including gender, race, and class), language, representation, and history.

A post-colonial critic might be interested in works such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* where colonial ideology is manifest in Crusoe's colonialist attitude toward the land upon which he's shipwrecked and toward the black man he 'colonizes' and names Friday.

Post-colonial criticism might point out that despite Heart of Darkness's (Joseph Conrad) obvious anti-colonist agenda, the novel points to the colonized population as the standard of savagery to which Europeans are contrasted. Post-colonial criticism also takes the form of literature composed by authors that critique Euro-centric hegemony.

The Palestinian American critic Edward Said was a major figure of postcolonial thought, and his book *Orientalism* is often credited as its founding text. Other important postcolonial critics include Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Frantz Fanon.

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