

## Formalism/New Criticism (1930s-present)

Summary: This resource will help you begin the process of understanding literary theory and schools of criticism and how they are used in the academy.

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Form Follows Function: Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Neo-Aristotelianism

Formalists disagreed about what specific elements make a literary work “good” or “bad”; but generally, Formalism maintains that a literary work contains certain intrinsic features, and the theory “...defined and addressed the specifically literary qualities in the text” (Richter 699). Therefore, it’s easy to see Formalism’s relation to Aristotle’s theories of dramatic construction.

Formalism attempts to treat each work as its own distinct piece, free from its environment, era, and even author. This point of view developed in reaction to “...forms of ‘extrinsic’ criticism that viewed the text as either the product of social and historical forces or a document making an ethical statement” (699). Formalists assume that the keys to understanding a text exist within “the text itself,” (...“the battle cry of the New Critical effort...” and thus focus a great deal on, you guessed it, form (Tyson 118).

For the most part, Formalism is no longer used in the academy. However, New Critical theories are still used in secondary and college level instruction in literature and even writing (Tyson 115).

Typical questions:

- \* How does the work use imagery to develop its own symbols? (i.e. making a certain road stand for death by constant association)
- \* What is the quality of the work’s organic unity “...the working together of all the parts to make an inseparable whole...” (Tyson 121)? In other words, does how the work is put together reflect what it is?
- \* How are the various parts of the work interconnected?
- \* How do paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension work in the text?
- \* How do these parts and their collective whole contribute to or not contribute to the aesthetic quality of the work?
- \* How does the author resolve apparent contradictions within the work?
- \* What does the form of the work say about its content?
- \* Is there a central or focal passage that can be said to sum up the entirety of the work?
- \* How do the rhythms and/or rhyme schemes of a poem contribute to the meaning or effect of the piece?

Here is a list of scholars we encourage you to explore to further your understanding of this theory:

Russian Formalism

- \* Victor Shklovsky
- \* Roman Jakobson
- \* Victor Erlich - Russian Formalism: History - Doctrine, 1955
- \* Yuri Tynyanov

New Criticism

- \* John Crowe Ransom - The New Criticism, 1938
- \* I.A. Richards
- \* William Empson
- \* T.S. Eliot
- \* Allen Tate
- \* Cleanth Brooks

Neo-Aristotelianism (Chicago School of Criticism)

- \* R.S. Crane - Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern, 1952
- \* Elder Olson
- \* Norman Maclean
- \* W.R. Keast
- \* Wayne C. Booth - The Rhetoric of Fiction, 1961