

From Kant to the Formalists

ENG 38001 Critical Theory and Reading

Literary Theory: an ideology, a philosophy, that structures how a work of literature should be conceived and perceived.

Literary Criticism: the application of literary theory to literature (either as a reader or as a writer).

Periods of Literature

These dates are not exact!

Classical Period: 1200 B.C.E. - 455 C.E.

Medieval Period

England: 455 C.E. - 1500 C.E.

Italy: 455 - 1300 C.E.

Renaissance and Reformation Period

England: 1500- 1660 C.E.

Italy: 1300 – 1660 C.E.

The Enlightenment Period: 1660 – 1790 C.E.

Romantic Period: 1790 – 1830 C.E.

Victorian Period and 19th Century: 1830 – 1900 C.E.

Modern Period: 1900 – 1950s C.E.

Postmodern Period: 1950s – present C.E.

After Kant and Hegel

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and George Hegel (1770-1831)

modernity vs. romanticism

reason vs. emotion

progress vs. nostalgia

rationalization of nature vs. idealization of nature

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Romanticism (approx. 1800-1850)

- Many writers and critics of the Romantic Period looked back toward:
 - the importance of the uniqueness of individuality (Renaissance Humanism)
 - a distorted/idealized (romanticized) view of the Middle Ages
- emphasis on emotion, especially as it reflected *new* categories of the sublime: apprehension, horror, awe (horrific beauty)
- glorification of the past, preferring the medieval over the classical ages
 - glorification of Nature
 - glorification of the human spirit and of individuality
- glorification of agrarian way of life (reaction against the Industrial Revolution)
 - glorification of folk art
 - glorification of spontaneity
 - glorification of Hegel's *zeitgeist* (spirit of the times)

Realism (approx. 1850-1900)

- began in France after the 1848 Revolution, when Louis Napoléon Bonaparte became President of the 2nd Republic
 - as a rejection of Romanticism
 - rejection of too much emotion
 - rejection of the over-dramatic
 - rejection of idealizations of humanity
 - rejection of history (and the nostalgia for it)
 - sought:
 - accurate portrayals of people, of all classes, but especially of ordinary people and ordinary life
 - everyday subjects
 - everyday situations
 - contemporary settings
 - avoidance of the artificial
- celebrated the seeming accuracy of photography (the Renaissance humanists' dream, in many ways)

Naturalism (late 19th century)

- began as a branch of literary realism
 - a type of extreme realism
- **naturalistic** writers write stories based on the idea that environment determines and governs human character
 - coined by Émile Zola (April 1840 – 29 September 1902)
- defines it as a literary movement which emphasizes observation and the scientific method in the fictional portrayal of reality
 - Other characteristics:
 - Detachment
 - Determinism
 - the opposite of free will
 - a sense that the universe itself is indifferent to human life
- Zola argued that naturalism in literature should be like controlled experiments in which the characters function as the phenomena.

Modernism

(first half of the 20th century, some argue it is still functioning as an ideology today)

- an outgrowth of
 - the Industrial Revolution
 - the sudden expansion of cities (in growth, the development of the metropolis)
 - the horrors of World War I
- in many ways, an extension of Realism, but in many other ways a rejection of realism
 - rejected Romanticism
 - for many, this included a rejection of religion

Modernism

(first half of the 20th century, some argue it is still functioning as an ideology today)

In general, this philosophy questions traditional forms of literature (and the theory behind it), in terms of how it reflects contemporary socio-political realities.

- Stream-of-consciousness writing
- meta-narratives (stories of stories)
 - theatre of the absurd
 - minimalism
- examination of the less-than-glamorous parts of life
- rejects the ideology of realism in that it is more interested in the psyche than the surface; sociological situations are a reflection of psychological existence
- at the same time, it embraces an aspect of realism (and humanism) in terms of “what a noble work is man” perceptions: the ability to reshape one's environment—to improve it (or destroy it)

Postmodernists (1950s to present?)

- an outgrowth of
 - World War II
 - Nuclear technologies and their use
- rejection of meta-narratives
- rejection of Enlightenment philosophy (of ideas centered on pure reason and the scientific method of understanding the world)
 - questions universalist perceptions of
 - truth
 - reality
 - morality
 - reason
 - consciousness
 - everything is relative, man
 - tendencies toward being
 - self-referential
 - epistemological (facts are relative to the circumstances)
 - pluralistic (multiple possibilities, as opposed to dualistic)
 - subjective

The Formalists

- Focused upon the structures of literature
 - modes
 - genres
 - discourse
 - grammar (word and phrase use)
 - syntax (sentence construction)
 - forms
 - meter
 - tropes
- a general debate arises regarding form *vs.* content: *which is more important?*
- Not interested in sociological or psychological contexts
- Formalists approaches arose in reaction against Romanticism, not centered on the author's creativity
 - text-centered
 - focuses on how the text develops from early texts (is built/structured upon earlier literary forms)

Russian Formalists (1910s - 1930s)

- OPOJAZ (Obshchestvo Izucheniia Poeticheskogo Yazyka, Society for the Study of Poetic Language)
- Moscow Linguistic Circle (Viktor Shklovsky)
- Roman Jakobson

Formalism/New Criticism

- New Criticism varied from formalism in that New Criticism focuses on image, symbol, and meaning. Traditional formalists often attacked New Critics for their lack of attention to the form of the work.
- Seminal works on New Criticism include John Crowe Ransom's The New Criticism (1941) and Cleanth Brooks' The Well Wrought Urn (1947).



New Criticism (late 1940s - 1970s)

- **John Crowe Ransom**
- **I. A. Richards**
- **Allan Tate**
- **Robert Penn Warren**
- **Cleanth Brooks**
- **F. R. Leavis**
- **William K. Wimsatt**
- **Monroe Beardsley**



