

**SUBJECT NAME: LITERARY CRITICISM**

**SUBJECT CODE: CEN 53**

**UNIT -IV**

## NEW CRITICISM

The New Criticism was a formalist movement in literary theory that dominated American literary criticism in the middle decades of the 20th century. It emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. The movement derived its name from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*. The work of English scholar I. A. Richards, especially his *Practical Criticism* and *The Meaning of Meaning*, which offered what was claimed to be an empirical, scientific approach, were important to the development of New Critical methodology. Also very influential were the critical essays of T. S. Eliot, such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Hamlet and His Problems", in which Eliot developed his notion of the "objective correlative". Eliot's evaluative judgments, such as his condemnation of Milton and Shelley, his liking for the so called metaphysical poets, and his insistence that poetry must be impersonal, greatly influenced the formation of the New Critical canon.

One of the most influential movements in modern critical scholarship, the New Criticism is a philosophy of literary interpretation that stresses the importance of studying literary texts as complete works of art in themselves. Although the term New Criticism was first coined in the nineteenth century, it was not until American critic and poet John Crow Ransom, founder of the *Kenyon Review* wrote a book titled *The New Criticism* (1941) that it became established in common academic and literary usage. In essence, the New Critics were reacting against established trends in American criticism, arguing for the primacy of the literary text instead of focusing on interpretations based on context. However, as René Wellek has noted in various essays detailing the principles of New Criticism, proponents of this theory had many differences among them, and beyond the importance the New Critics afforded the literary text itself, there were many differences in the way they approached critical study of literary texts. Wellek writes that among the growing number of New Critics in the 1930s, there were few that could be easily grouped together. For example, he puts Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren among the leaders of what he calls the —Southern Critics.

Mostly, they are grouped together due to their reaction against previously established schools of criticism, such as impressionist criticism, the humanist movement, the naturalist movement, and the Marxists, and the fact that many of them taught at Southern universities at the time they created the theory of New Criticism. In addition to rallying against traditional modes of literary interpretations, the most significant contribution made by the New Critics, according to Wellek, was the success with which they established criticism itself as a major academic discipline.

The most simplistic definitions of New Criticism identify it as a critical movement that propagates the idea of —art for art's sake. Yet, according to Gerald Graff, Wellek, and others, the New Critics did concern themselves with the history and context of a work of literature. For them, to truly understand a work of literature, it was important to —embrace a total historical

scheme, using it as the standard against which one judges a literary text. The principles of the New Criticism are basically verbal. That is literature is conceived to be a special kind of language whose attributes are defined by systematic opposition to the language of science and of practical and logical discourse, and the explicative procedure is to analyze the meanings and interactions of words, figures of Speech and Symbols. The main theme is Close reading (or explication de texte) was a staple of French literary studies, but in the United States, aesthetic concerns, and the study of modern poets was the province of non-academic essayists and book reviewers rather than serious scholars. But the New Criticism changed this. Though their interest in textual study initially met with resistance from older scholars, the methods of the New Critics rapidly predominated in American universities until challenged by Feminism and structuralism in the 1970s.

Thus, New Critics insist that the meaning of a text is intrinsic and should not be confused with the author's intentions nor the work's affective dimension (its impressionistic effects on the reader). The "intentional fallacy" is when one confuses the meaning of a work with the author's purported intention (expressed in letters, diaries, interviews, for example). The "affective fallacy" is the erroneous practice of interpreting texts according to the psychological or emotional responses of readers, confusing the text with its results.

### **Structuralism**

**A movement of thought in the humanities, widespread in anthropology, linguistics, and literary theory, and influential in the 1950s and '60s. Based primarily on the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralism considered language as a system of signs and signification, the elements of which are understandable only in relation to each other and to the system. 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. The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss was an important champion of structuralism, as was Roman Jakobson. Northrop Frye's attempts to categorize Western literature by archetype had some basis in structuralist thought. Structuralism regarded language as a closed, stable system, and by the late 1960s it had given way to post-structuralism.**

Structuralism deals with a scientific process of identifying and analysing the codes, the forms, the signs, the systems and the symbols embedded in social and cultural practices. Structuralists believe that visible practices have deeper meanings that one can only uncover by understanding the signs and symbols associated with them.

## Structuralism in Literary Theory or Structuralist Theory in Literature:

In literature, the primary task that Structuralist theorists look for is to find the patterns, symbols, layers of the narrative, the framework of the plot, or similarities in the content with previously published works. Linguistic analysis of the text aims at the relationship between words and social practices (not very popular today). Structuralist criticism that deals with the formal or narrative-based analysis of the text concerns finding patterns and sequences that recur in previously published texts.

Literary figures often featured in questions related to Structuralism are Roland Barthes, Jonathan Culler, Gérard Genette, Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Umberto Eco, and Vladimir Propp.

The early seeds of Structuralism in literature fell from the hands of Claude Lévi-Strauss. However, it was not entirely literary. Lévi-Strauss, an anthropologist, interpreted the Greek myth of Oedipus in the light of a structuralist outlook. He proposed that the myth of Oedipus had no meaning unless one saw it as one episode in the sequence of myths related to the city of Thebes. Lévi-Strauss further proposed the discovery of motifs, repetition of motifs and reemerging contrasts. And thus, the anthropologist connects the Myth of Oedipus to the superstructure of certain recurring fundamental oppositions in the Greek.

## Important Names in Structuralism and Their Contributions to the Development of the Theory:

Ferdinand de Saussure (Switzerland) – Saussure was a linguist. It is a general perception that he laid down the foundations on which the theory of Structuralism stood. His phenomenal book *Course in General Linguistics* offered many scholars a chance to look at literature from an entirely new point of view. Saussure, however, focused more on language in general. He is also the originator of the concept ‘signifier and signified’ that we often find while reading about Structuralism, Deconstruction, and other literary theories. Keywords: sign, signified

Yury Lotman (USSR) – Celebrated author of *Analysis of The Poetic Text* (1975), Lotman wrote many other books on ‘signs’ that Saussure proposed. He believed that literary texts carry more value as they have a ‘higher information load’. (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker 65).

Maria Corti, Cesare Segre, Umberto Eco (Italy) and Michael Riffaterre (France) – They were influential figures in the field of literary semiotics. The preoccupation with linguistic analyses of literature, occasionally, other than the investigation of the sign system in language, was the work they did. Keywords: semiotics

Roland Barthes (France) – Where don’t you find Barthes? A student of literary theory knows the pain! Barthes is everywhere. His legacy has mingled beautifully with the pages of books on literary theory. *S/Z*, *The Semiotic Challenge*, *Elements of Semiology*, and *The Empire of Signs*

were his significant contributions to the Structuralist discourse in literary theory. Barthes studied fashion, popular culture and Mythology in the light of Structuralism.

Vladimir Propp (Russia) – Propp offered the first comprehensive ‘structure’ that could elicit the framework of a work of literature. Taking forward the ideas of Todorov, he analysed the Russian Fairy tales and detailed the structure that was present in all those stories. The protagonist becomes the subject. The actions of the protagonist are functions. Propp listed 31 functions. All the functions, he argued, followed a logical sequence.

Algirdas Julien Greimas (Lithuania, France) – Better known as A J Greimas, he took Vladimir Propp’s ‘structure’ one step ahead. Greimas proposed ‘three pairs of binary oppositions’. These pairs offer an understanding of any work of literature in terms of the following pattern: Subject/Object, Sender/Receiver, Helper/Opponent. Further, Greimas ascribe a few associations to these patterns in the following manner: Desire, Search or Aim (Subject/Object), Communication (Sender/Receiver), Auxilliary Support or Hindrance (Helper/Opponent). Ideally, this pattern does exist at the core of literary works.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (France) – Lévi-Strauss had more interest in structural patterns than narrative sequence. He devised mythemes, the units of myth. He attempted a structuralist interpretation of Greek myths, especially Oedipus. Strauss proposed that individual tales from the corpus of myths did not have distinguished meaning. One could understand, Strauss emphasised, any tale from the Myths only by locating the tale against the body of Myths.

Tzvetan Todorov (Bulgaria) – Todorov was one of the most influential critics in the field of Narratology (a version of Structuralism that focuses more on the narrative as a whole). He proposed a general ‘grammar’ of literature. He brought to the attention the basic unit of the narrative, propositions. Todorov suggested that a narrative has many sequences, a sequence contains propositions, and a proposition, he argued, could be an agent (subject) or action (predicate). His ideas were close to Formalism. Nevertheless, Todorov went beyond the strict measures of form. He also described that a sequence has five propositions – Equilibrium, Force, Disequilibrium, Force, and Equilibrium. Keywords: narrative syntax

Gérard Genette (France) – Perhaps the most convincing, organised and authoritative Structuralist theorist of all, Gérard Genette, gave new dimensions to the study of the narrative. Genette proposed that a narrative has three levels – story, discourse and narration. He also devised the utility of tense, mood and voice to study the dimensions of a narrative.

Jonathan Culler (America) – Jonathan Culler focused on discovering unity in the text. Though his celebrated work puts various aspects of structuralist theory in front of the readers with clarity in *Structuralist Poetics*, Culler tried to shift the responsibility of decoding the text to the readers rather than indulging in finding patterns in the text. *Langue* for him becomes competence, and *parole* turns into performance (Noam Chomsky). Culler relies on the ‘skills’ of the skilled

readers. Culler looks for patterns in the interpretations of texts rather than looking for them in the writers' endeavour.

### **Post Structuralism**

The second half of the twentieth century, with its torturous experiences of the World Wars, Holocaust and the advent of new technologies, witnessed revolutionary developments in literary theory that were to undermine several of the established notions of Western literary and cultural thought. The most prominent of them was Poststructuralism, with its watchword of “deconstructive reading” endorsed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. The theory, launched in Derrida's paper *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* (1966), which he presented at Johns Hopkins University, had its roots in philosophy, especially in Martin Heidegger's concept of “Destruktion”. Derrida was also influenced by Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, each of whom brought about revolutionary ways of thinking in their respective disciplines.

Derrida attacked the systematic and quasi-scientific pretensions of structuralism — derived from Saussurean Structural Linguistics and Levi-Strauss' Structural Anthropology — which presupposes a centre that organises and regulates the structure and yet “escapes structurality”. Contemporary thinkers like Foucault, Barthes and Lacan undertook in diverse ways to decentre/undermine the traditional claims for the existence of a self-evident foundation that guarantees the validity of knowledge and truth. This anti-foundationalism and scepticism about the traditional concepts of meaning, knowledge, truth and subjectivity also found radical expression in Marxism (Althusser), Feminisms (Butler, Cixous, Kristeva), New Historicism (Greenblatt) and Reader Response theory (Iser, Bloom and others).

Poststructuralism emphasised the indeterminate and polysemic nature of semiotic codes and the arbitrary and constructed nature of the foundations of knowledge. Having originated in a politically volatile climate, the theory laid greater stress on the operations of ideology and power on human subjectivity. In deconstructionist thought, the connection between thought / reality, subject /object, self /other are viewed as primarily linguistic terms, and not as pre-existent to language. With the famous statement “there is nothing outside the text”, Derrida established the provisionality and constructedness of reality, identity and human subjectivity. Undermining “logocentricism” as the “metaphysics of presence” that has ever pervaded Western philosophy and cultural thought, Derrida proposed the concept of “écriture”, which is beyond logos, and characterised by absence and difference, where there is free play of signifiers, without ever arriving at the “transcendental signified”, where meanings are locked in aporias and can be located only in traces.

Paul de Man in his *Allegories of Reading* explores the theory of figurative language, affirming that linguistic texts are self-deconstructing. Barbara Johnson in *A World of Difference* illustrated deconstruction in the context of race and gender. Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* used

deconstruction to problematise the privileged, academic, post colonial critics' unknowing participation in the exploitation of the third world.