



## **THE EMERGENCE OF FORMALIST CRITICISM: AN OVERVIEW**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In their critical theories, the stress was laid only on the ideas and intellectual contents of the work of art. Early Victorians had emphasized the moral, social and religious uses of literature which had resulted in extrinsic approach to literature. As a reaction to these movements a 'new' movement appeared on the literary scene which propagated for the study of the 'form' and 'artistic' aspects of a work of art, and was named 'Formalist' school or a school of 'new' critics. They felt that the only course open for the literary criticism to avoid being exploited by industrialism, and save literature from history, sociology and science. The concentration on the form, structure, technique, images, metaphors rhymes and such other items was thought to be worthwhile as it was thought that it could give the analysis of a literary work wider depth of meaning and help the critic explore the real depth of meaning.*

**Key Words:** *Structure, Formalist Criticism, New Critics, Aesthetic Sensibility.*

The writers and critics of America and England were very much dissatisfied at the turn of the twentieth century. The intellectuals of that period suffered from literary unrest because their hopes and expectations which they had from the new century were going to remain unfulfilled. Though in the wake of scientific advances, the whole atmosphere was pregnant with intellectual activity, the literary theoreticians thought that there had come a stagnation in the field of literary criticism. This feeling of stagnation in criticism sustained because there were many critical schools prevalent which approached a literary work from external standpoints only. In their critical theories, the stress was laid only on the ideas and intellectual contents of the work of art. Early Victorians had emphasized the moral, social and religious uses of literature which had resulted in extrinsic approach to literature. As a reaction to these movements a 'new' movement appeared on the literary scene which propagated for the study of the 'form' and 'artistic' aspects of a work of art, and was named 'Formalist' school or a school of 'new' critics.



To understand this reaction and emergence of a 'new' critical movement, it is necessary to study and discuss the methods and techniques, which were in vogue before the 'formalist' school came up, and what those techniques lacked and how the awareness of those shortcomings suddenly emerged. Among the types of critical approaches practised at that time the main were *Philosophical, Historical, Cultural and Sociological, Moralistic, Marxist, Biographical, Psychological, Impressionistic and Humanistic* Schools of criticism. These critical schools are based on the particular concepts of the nature and function of literature, and the duty of the critic in relation to it. Actually all these schools are extrinsic schools of criticism that tried to explore a literary work from the external canons.

The exponents of Historical-Cultural and Sociological schools of criticism urged the necessity of assessing literature in the context of contemporary values and social conditions. In their opinion, literature reflects the age in which it is produced and simultaneously it is the product of the particular conditions of the time and cultural and sociological forces. The theoretical basis for this school of criticism was provided by Hippolyte A. Taine, a great nineteenth century French literary critic and historian in his book *History of English Literature* where he declared that three factors - race, surrounding and epoch affect the writing of a literary work. In the application of this approach, literary evaluation takes its task only to study the origin and success of literary work and make the factual study based on data of historical happenings. Thus literature becomes only a record of such happenings and literary aspects of the literary work are ignored here. This type of criticism has been propagated by Matthew Arnold, Lionel Trilling and Raymond Williams. The Marxist school of criticism judged a work of art in accordance with the theory of class struggle and according to the degree to which the poem reflects the particular datum of the theory. This school also overlooked the formal and artistic aspects of the literary work. The humanistic and moralistic critics like Irving Babbitt and Yvor Winters considered the function of a critic to judge a work of art only on the basis of the moral values it exhibits. Moralistic critics isolated the moral values embedded in works of art and assessed their significance for society because they defined the function of literature as only the teaching of moral and ethical qualities.

Biographical critics pleaded that the best method for the illumination of a work of art is to trace the parallel accounts of the personal life of the author and of his poetic achievements because behind the work is the man who is the most important. Whereas biographical critics emphasized the personality of the individual against the vast background of human and non-human factors, the psychological critics probed into the inner recesses of the mind of the author. Another sort of psychological criticism which was propounded by critics like Plato and Aristotle judged the value of literature in the light of the effects that it has on the minds of the readers, which is called affective criticism. These psychological schools of criticism whether they enumerate the literary problems with the probing into the psychology of the

writer or with the effects of that work on the psychology of the reader are inept applications because here also the literary work as such remains untouched. The most significant form of this psychological criticism is the Archetypal criticism which studies the psychology not of the individual but of the whole race and probe into the inherited primitive patterns, concepts and beliefs which have come down to us over centuries through immemorial traditions, customs and conventions. This theory is best expressed in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*. The Impressionistic criticism which developed mainly during the revival of Romantic traditions gave in the name of criticism the sensations and feelings of the critic while reading a literary work.

All these and many other modes of criticism available had one flaw or the other in them. They were evaluating the work of art by bringing external factors like moral, biographical and psychological ones to bear on the literary discussion. These extrinsic approaches considered a work of art according to a pre-conceived theory of society, life or history. They did not answer the question why literature is what it has come to be and what it is. Literature was for them only a means to find out several non-literary things there. In the words of Stanley Edgar Hyman they were making "organic use of non-literary techniques and bodies of knowledge to obtain insights into literature" (Hyman18). This kind of criticism with its distinct emphasis upon the background and environment of literature, and concentration upon the mental processes and abnormalities of the author, and judgement of a work of art through the impressions of the readers was much in vogue before the beginning of the twentieth century.

Ezra Pound propounded his critical theory in many of his critical writings and in his essay 'The Teacher's Mission', he laid stress on the study of the texts as a good method. Ezra Pound remarks:

All teaching of literature should be performed by the presentation and juxtaposition of specimens of writing and not by discussion of some other discussor's opinion about the general standing of a poet or author. Any teacher of biology would tell you that knowledge cannot be transmitted by general statement without knowledge of particulars. (Pound 132)

Another major influence on the critical discipline of the coming Formalist critics was T.S. Eliot, who himself was greatly influenced by Ezra Pound. In his two collections of Essays, *Selected Essays* and *The Secret Wood* he provided several hints for formalist criticism and the indebtedness of the formalist critics to T.S. Eliot is more direct and well acknowledged. First of all, he talked about the Romantic Impressionistic Criticism and contends, "Poetry is not turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion, it is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality" (Eliot 11). Talking against the biographical and psychological proings as means of proper critical analysis and enquiry. Eliot averred that a

great artist always presents and creates something so objectively away from his personal experiences and sufferings that the finished work that comes out is a work of its own kind and not merely a record of the mental sufferings and biographical details of the artist. These assertions of Eliot reveal that he pleaded for a kind of critical enquiry much away from the probings of biographical and psychological areas. Rather he advocated the close study of the text because the uniqueness of poetry lies in its structural existence.

Another eminent critic who contributed to the creation of new climate of ideas in the beginning of the twentieth century and brought about a kind of revolution in the field of literary criticism like T.S. Eliot, was I.A. Richards. The influence of his critical writings on the critical concepts of the formalists critics has been universally acknowledged. Douglas Bush calls 'new' criticism "the off spring of Mr. Richards and Mr. Eliot" (Bush 17). The major works of Richards are *The Foundations of Aesthetics* written in collaboration with C. K. Ogden, *Meaning of Meaning*, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, *Science and Poetry*, *Practical Criticism*, *Minicius on the Mind*, *Basic Rules of Reason*, *Coleridge on Imagination* and *The Philosophy of Reason*. I. A. Richards was not a formalist critic but many of his observations which lie scattered in the critical writings have a direct relevance to formalist criticism. Though I.A. Richards in his critical theory lays stress on the reader-psychology to be considered for literary interpretation, he discourages and discredits from the very outset any attempt to indulge in poet-psychology. Richards pleaded strongly for the value of literary and poetic experience by making a distinction between the exact, scientific and referential knowledge of science, and universal fundamental and emotive truth of literature. Richards advocated for the superiority of poetry to Science as poetic truth gives emotional satisfaction and emotional integration. Thus Richards distinguished between Science and Poetry and placed the emotional truth higher than the calculated truth of science, and this was incorporated by the formalist critics also.

Then there was another budding critic William Empson who also advocated formalist criticism by writing his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in 1930. Elder Olson calls this book, "a classic of modern criticism" (Olson 45). William Empson was a disciple of I.A. Richards and in his book he laid down his theory of seven types of 'ambiguity' which is drawn from Richards's notion of ambiguity. For Empson, "ambiguity is the undeniable quality of poetry and ambiguity is a thing which the more interesting and valuable situations are more likely to justify. Empson extends the meaning of 'ambiguity' from its usual meaning. It normally means 'double meaning', 'puzzling' or concise statement. For Empson, "It is any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (Empson 21). Empson realised the value of 'ambiguity' of the language of poetry. When we make the close reading of the text keeping in mind the ambiguous nature of the language of poetry, we can find that words fall into strange combinations and reflect several levels of meanings. For Empson, ambiguities are 'types' of 'logical disorder' arranged as stages of advancing disorder or what is apparently the same thing in order of increasing

distance from the simple statement and logical disposition. Empson divides these 'ambiguities' into seven types which include the use of antithesis, verbal irony, comparative adjective, subdued metaphor etc. He has analysed many poems of Shakespeare, Marvell and others to show that if the ambiguities which are embedded in the language of poetry are clarified they can reveal varieties and levels of meaning, but this can be done only by bestowing the closest and most intelligent attention on the text. Empson has made this kind of analysis in his book. For him ambiguity is the essence of poetry because a poet communicates his ideas and evoke certain emotions in the reader only through the peculiar use of language. In order to achieve the intended effect a writer decides what elements should be selected for a poem and what words and their relationships with one another can capture and create the same process as was in the writer's mind. Hence for Empson, the study of such poetic use of language becomes a vital element in poetry which a critic has to analyse. This is the main theoretical assumption behind Empson's critical practice. All the prominent formalist critics like J.C. Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, R. P. Blackmur and others praised this Empsonian method which insisted on the close reading of the text based on language as the sole function of criticism. Stanley Edgar Hyman proclaims:

Page after page contains certainly the most elaborate and probably the finest close reading of poetry ever put down, the fantastic, wonderful and almost endless spinning out of implications and linguistic possibilities. (Hyman 111)

Thus Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* proved to be a major critical event by reading poetry in a way and at length no one had ever read it before. George Watson refers to this contribution of William Empson to English criticism and its impact of later formalistic criticism in these words:

Empson did not invent the technique of verbal analysis which dominated criticism fashion in the forties and fifties but he was the first to systematize it, and he popularized much of its characteristic jargon. (Watson 156)

In this way the twentieth century formalist criticism shaped itself under the influence of major English critics like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, William Empson and others. All of these critics were trying to focus attention of literary criticism to the literary work, in one way or the other, saving it from the external approaches to literature.

At the same time in the U.S.A. critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, R.P. Blackmur and others were struggling to give literary theory a new orientation not so different from the one the British critics had attempted to do. These critics knew one another and they formed a society named 'Fugitives' and published their basic ideas in *The Fugitive*, a journal which was started by them. They were the Nashvillians of Vanderbilt who identified themselves with the vanishing agricultural society of the South,

and they were aware of the crisis that science and industrial organisation of North had brought about in literary criticism. J. N. Patnaik remarks:

What the critics of Britain were realizing in terms of a general modern predicament was to the Southern critics a realisation through a regional awareness. (Patnaik 3)

They made persistent efforts in close and conscious collaboration with each other to preserve aesthetic values from the onslaughts attitudes. With this aim in view, they brought forth a few journals, edited them and contributed articles to them. For example, *The Southern Review* was edited for sometime by Cleanth Brooks in collaboration with Robert Penn Warren. John Crowe Ransom was the editor of *The Kenyon Review* throughout and Allen Tate edited for some time *The Sewanee Review*. All these critics were consciously devoted to bring forward a particular approach to poetry and literature, with a missionary zeal. They attacked the prevalent modes of historical, philosophical, moralistic, impressionistic, biographical and cultural approaches because literary history had given up its traditional connection with literature and had allied itself with the physical sciences of the nineteenth century. Thus in the industrial society of the North, the arts were making desperate attempts at survival the artists and critics were losing their hold on themselves and criticism was becoming a mechanical procedure. Being influenced by the budding critics of the North, they set up new principles and norms which literature could be redeemed from the snares of science in which it had been caught. Wilbur Scott remarks in this connection, "In any case the atmosphere of the thirties was ripe for such an approach as formalistic critics then began to practise" (Scott 181).

Conclusively, Southern critics felt the urgent necessity of rescuing poetry and criticism from the vagaries of worn-out theories on the one hand, and on the other, from the increasing influence that led to the apprehension that aesthetic sensibility was on the point of extinction in the face of materialism and utilitarianism. They felt that the only course open for the literary criticism to avoid being exploited by industrialism, and save literature from history, sociology and science. The concentration on the form, structure, technique, images, metaphors rhymes and such other items was thought to be worthwhile as it was thought that it could give the analysis of a literary work wider depth of meaning and help the critic explore the real depth of meaning. As these critics laid emphasis on the study of form, and structure of a literary work and its growth, these critics were named as 'formalist' and the kind of criticism preached and practised by them is called 'Formalism'.



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