

Troy Shaffer

Dr. Gurfinkel

ENG301

22 September 2025

The Good and Ultimately Bad of New Criticism

New Criticism is a literary theory that has been pretty influential, but I have a few problems with it. The big idea behind New Criticism is that a work of literature should be analyzed all on its own, without thinking about the author's life, the time period, or the reader's personal reactions. Although this theory has some strengths, it also comes with some big limitations. New Criticism is good for its focus on close reading and analysis, but its negligence of context and reader reactions makes it a weak approach to literature.

One thing about New Criticism is that it puts all the focus on the text itself. Everything you need to understand about a text is right there on the page, there is no need to bring in the author's life story or what was going on in history at the time. This makes analysis feel more focused and a little more objective. It's great because you can look closely at the language and structure without getting distracted by outside information. Cleanth Brooks says "the formalist critic knows as well as anyone that literary works are mere potential until they are read - that is, that they are recreated in the minds of actual readers, who vary enormously in their capabilities, their interests, their prejudices, their ideas. But the formalist critic is concerned primarily with the work itself." (Brooks 16). So basically, even though all readers are different, New Criticism only wants to stick to the words on the page. The focus is helpful but also limiting. Ignoring outside context might make you miss important meanings in a text. The authors' lives and world

events during their time will most likely shape what they write. For example, reading a book about a war without knowing anything about the time period it was written about/in could make you overlook certain symbols from the time that are important. So even though this method helps with analytical skills, it can oversimplify literature by ignoring context.

Another plus side of New Criticism is how much it values close reading. New Criticism's approach wants readers to look closely at the structure, word choice, imagery, etc in a text. A poem or novel doesn't have to be literally "true" to be meaningful, what matters is how the text and its elements work together. For example, Brooks asked, "What is the relation of the beauty (the goodness, the perfection) of a poem to the truth or falsity of what it seems to assert?" (Brooks 22). This question really digs into New Criticism. It's not about a poem being factually accurate, but about how beautifully and effectively it expresses its ideas. This kind of analysis shows how well crafted literature can be, and it helps you appreciate the small details that makes literature powerful.

With all of that being said, there are some limitations to New Criticism as well, and one of the most significant is how it essentially shuts out the reader's personal experiences and emotional responses. Brooks stated that "...the formalist critic assumes an ideal reader: that is, instead of focusing on the various spectrum of possible readings, he attempts to find a central point of reference from which he can focus upon the structure of the poem or novel." (Brooks 17). The approach of New Criticism has a lot of focus on the idea of the "ideal reader" and finding one correct interpretation of a text based on its language, structure, etc. While this is useful for close analysis, every reader comes to a text with their own unique background, emotions, and life experiences and that is completely ignored. A person's life and experiences can deeply influence how someone understands and connects with a story or poem. By

disregarding that, New Criticism feels limiting, as if it's trying to force you into a box. Because in my opinion, one of the coolest parts about reading literature, especially in a class setting, is its ability to resonate differently with different people, which ultimately creates a wide range of meanings and emotional responses. So, New Criticism overlooks an important aspect of what makes reading such a personal experience.

New Criticism being applied to music or poetry shows its weaknesses as well, as you would focus solely on the lyrics or text itself. For example, a song I like is called *Sidelines* by Phoebe Bridgers. With this theory you would be analyzing the song's lyrics without considering her life or the listener's emotions. In the song Bridgers sings "Watch the world from the sidelines, had nothing to prove, 'til you came into my life, gave me something to lose". If you looked at the lyrics with New Criticism in mind, they talk about being isolated and distant until meeting someone using pretty simple language. When I listen to music, I am almost always finding a way to connect the song to my life, whether it be about a person or just a situation in my life. I feel like a lot of people bring their own experiences to the music they listen to, relating their life to the lyrics. When a song or poem is easily relatable, people are more likely to connect to and enjoy it. So, there is this tension between analyzing lyrics and emotional interpretation that shows a limitation of New Criticism when it comes to music as well as poetry, especially when the work can cause personal reactions.

After taking a deep dive into New Criticism, it has some good methods for engaging with literature, but it insists on taking away context and personal interpretation from the text, which ultimately makes it fall a bit short in my eyes. It has some aspects of close reading and analysis that I still find useful, especially for understanding how texts are constructed. So rather than ignoring New Criticism, the most productive approach is to take parts of it and combine it with

other perspectives. Literature is more than just words and letters on a page, the author, history and readers are an important aspect. New Criticism has its ups and downs for me, but it's just one of many literary theories, and I think I will get better understandings of texts if I combine it with other ideas rather than fully focusing on New Criticism.

Works Cited

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