

LECTURE FIVE+SIX

The Formalist Approach

An Introduction

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears;
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch o f earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Syllables and Meter

- The speaker (mother? father? lover?) remembers the immunity of the female figure to any earthly touch. After a gap in time (she) is dead and buried.
- The meter is unvarying.
- Soft and strong syllables alternate (4) in lines 1, 3, 5, 7 then (3) in the rest.
- The rhymes are equally regular and predictable.

Irony and Paradox

- The speaker was secure (slumbering) in that the female figure would somehow transcend earthly normalities.
- The "slumber" of line (1) has become the eternal sleep of death.
- The "seal" of the "spirit" has become the coffin seal of the body.
- The life of the dynamic person in lines (3,4) where sense perceptions of touching and feeling seem transmuted into angelic dimensions, is now turned into unfeeling death.
- The once motion-filled person is still in motion- but of rocks and stones, and gravestones.

Irony, Paradox and Ambiguity

- The sleep of life becomes the sleep of death.
- The sibilant sounds of "s" suggest quiet contentment, but in the second stanza seem mournful echoes.
- "Spirit" and "seal" continue the sibilant quality and are ambiguous terms "spirit" (death + life), "seal" (security + finality)
- The word "thing" in line (3)

Structure and Texture

- The references to the senses (feel, touch in stanza 1) → (motion + hears + sees in stanza 2) involves the muscles in kinetics and kinesthesia
- In line (7), the reality of kinetic motion without kinesthesia
- (Rolled round) alliterating “r” and the consonance of the “d”
- The two uses of “no” in line (5), if stressed will give greater impact to the negative effect of the whole statement.
- Ebullient sound in line (7) against the finality and slowed pace of the heavily slowed line (8)

THE PROCESS OF FORMALIST ANALYSIS: MAKING THE CLOSE READER

1. Be sensitive to the words of the text (denotative + connotative) multiple meanings, even etymologies of words.
2. Look for structural relationships and patterns not only of sentences but of stanzas, the tone or mood or the shifting of moods.
3. The sequence of plot elements, or the juxtaposition of scenes in a play.
4. probe the connotations, symbols and images

THE PROCESS OF FORMALIST ANALYSIS: MAKING THE CLOSE READER

- Look for allusions to history or mythology, or to another work of literature.
- Words with more than one meaning → multiple readings → irony
- Structure, shape, interrelationships, denotations and connotations, images, symbols, repeated details, climax balances and tensions, rhythms and rhymes sounds, the speaker's apparent voice, a single line or even a word.

MAKING THE CLOSE READER

- The difference between close reading and the way most people read most of the time is that, whereas it is generally agreed that it is the big picture that matters, close reading emphasizes small details. We have been trained to read a book globally: that is, to think of the book as a whole, identify its main idea, and understand all of its parts as fitting together to make up that whole. Close reading, on the other hand, is a technique for letting the whole book, the main argument, the global picture fade into the background.

MAKING THE CLOSE READER

- When we close read, we zero in on details but we do not immediately fit those details into our idea of the whole book. Instead we try to understand the details themselves as much as possible, to derive as much meaning as we can from them. The reason for this is that the detail is the best possible safeguard against projection. It is the main idea or the general shape which is most likely to correspond to our preconceptions about the book. But we cannot so easily predict the details. So by concentrating on the details, we disrupt our projection; we are forced to see what is really there

A Formalist View of Literature

- ❑ The name of the author is not important.
- ❑ The time in which the author lived is not important.
- ❑ Any cultural impact on the author's life is not important.
- ❑ The political beliefs of the author are not important.
- ❑ The actual reader is not important.

Formalists Focus on Specific Aspects

- Formalists pay special attention to the formal features of the text – the style, structure, imagery, tone, and genre.
- Not examined in isolation – what gives a literary text its special status as art is how all its elements work together to create the reader's total experience
- Great literature is “universal.”
- Specific passages in great works of literature can be closely analyzed to determine its message

Formalism Ignores Peripheral Aspects

- Formalists believe that looking at the psychology and biography of the author inform the writing process, not the composition itself.
- Formalism does not evaluate or consider the religious, moral, or political value of a piece.
- Formalism strives to force literary or artwork to stand on its own.

A Checklist of Formalist Critical Questions

- How is the work structured or organized? How does it begin? Where does it go next? How does it end?
- What is the relationship of each part of the work to the work as a whole? How are the parts related to one another?
- Who is narrating or telling what happens in the work? How is the narrator, speaker, or character revealed to readers? How do we come to know and understand this figure?

A Checklist of Formalist Critical Questions

- Who are the major and minor characters, what do they represent, and how do they relate to one another?
- What are the time and place of the work – its setting? How is the setting related to what we know of the characters and their actions? To what extent is the setting symbolic?
- What kind of language does the author use to describe, narrate, explain, or otherwise create the world of the literary work? More specifically, what images, similes, metaphors, symbols appear in the work? What is their function? What meanings do they convey?

A BRIEF HISTORY

- ❑ Developed by English and American critics in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.
- ❑ To many students of literature during that era, it was called the New Criticism.
- ❑ In the last third of the century, it was called by other abusive names
- ❑ “formalist” will be used synonymously with the methodology of the New Critics not directly with the Russian formalists.

The text as language

□ David Lodge writes:

All good criticism is ... necessarily a response to the creative use of language, whether it is talking explicitly of “plot” or “character” or any other of the categories of narrative literature. These terms are useful—indeed essential—but the closer we get to defining the unique identity and interest of this plot, of that character, the closer we are brought to a consideration of the language in which we encounter these things