

LECTURE SEVEN+EIGHT



THE FORMALISTIC APPROACH

Backgrounds of Formalist Theory



- Classical art and aesthetics (Plato, Aristotle's *Poetics*, and Horace)
- The Romantic movement in Europe in the late 18th and 19th centuries (Coleridge, Keats and Shelley)

This interrelationship between the whole and the parts
+ the image of growth, vegetation.

- Edgar Allan Poe and the unity of effect

The New Criticism



- appeared in the 1930s at Vanderbilt University in the years following World War I
- the dominant form of academic criticism well into the 1960s.
- Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks were its leading figures
- T. S. Eliot
- Several publications, p. 81

The New Criticism



- *The Fugitive* (1922–25) and later *The Southern Review* (1935–42).
- I. A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929).
- *The Criterion*, An influential literary quarterly published in England from 1922 to 1939. Edited by T. S. Eliot, whose most famous poem *The Waste Land* appeared in its first issue, the journal helped to propagate the principles of NEW CRITICISM.

UNITY



- As Wimsatt and Beardsley note, “For all the objects of our manifold experience, for every unity, there is an action of the mind which cuts off roots, melts away context – or indeed we should never have objects or ideas or anything to talk about.”

Constants of the Formalistic Approach



1. Form and Organic Form
2. Texture, Image, Symbol
3. Metaphysical Conceit
4. FALLACIES
5. Point of View
6. The Speaker's Voice
7. Ambiguity

Form and Organic Form



- In the past, the word “form” meant external form
- ORGANIC FORM associated with ROMANTICISM (a literary text is a living organism, like a tree, with a natural, internal form).
- In poems, form is the metrics, rhymes
- In novels and plays, form is the interrelationships of plot and subplot or the complex stream of consciousness
- form has potential to embody meaning

Texture, Image, Symbol



- Imagery and metaphor are an integral part of the work
- Delighted in close analysis of imagery (single or a multiple)
- Consistency of imagery creates texture
- In NEW CRITICISM, the density and complexity of the texture of a poem are marks of its value.
- Much interest in Metaphysical poetry and in the Metaphysical conceit
- Shelley, along with other Romantics was disparaged by formalist critics for loose imagery
- Symbol is when an image (incident, object) takes on meaning beyond its objective self which creates a **dilemma**

Metaphysical Conceit



- A term for a particularly fanciful metaphor or a clever, witty expression.
- T. S. Eliot and other advocates of NEW CRITICISM celebrated the Metaphysical elaborate conceits.
- Eliot saw these conceits as instances of a unified sensibility.

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be

FALLACIES



Among the errors to be avoided were the

- INTENTIONAL FALLACY, the attempt to locate meaning in the author's intention
- AFFECTIVE FALLACY, the attempt to search for meaning in the experience of the reader.
- Aristotle's concept of "catharsis", the purging of the audience at a tragedy that cleanses the emotions.

These two fallacies are coined by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley.

- true meaning resided in "the text itself," the language of the poem or story.

Point of View



- like consistency of imagery, Point of View is a virtue
- nonexistent point of view flaws the work and makes it have no integrity
- Fragmentation may be avoided by using omniscient narrator
- Failure to note point of view as an aspect of form will result in a misreading or in an inadequate reading of the work.

The Speaker's Voice



- In lyric poetry, tone of voice is analogous to point of view
- Speaker, hearer
- In Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" the lover is a madman and the beloved though present has been murdered by him.

Tension, Irony, Paradox



- Irony refers to the technique of implying something very different from what one is ostensibly saying.
- paradox is an apparent contradiction that asserts a truth.
- Tension, the resolution of opposites, often in irony and paradox.
- the integral unity that results from the successful resolution of the conflicts of abstraction and concreteness, of general and particular, of denotation and connotation.

Ambiguity



- lack of clarity in a situation or in an expression.
- In language using it is generally regarded as an error or flaw.
- This view was dominant until the publication of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930)
- a literary technique in which a word or phrase conveys two or more different meanings which can enhance the experience of poetry.

Ambiguity



- Empson describes the phenomenon of ambiguity at a number of points: as a word or phrase of which “alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading”; as “a word or grammatical structure that is effective in several ways at once”; as a feature of “all good poetry” – even a feature whose “machinations...are among the very roots of poetry.

An example of Ambiguity



- Empson's analysis of a line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 73. In the poem the speaker compares his advancing age to a tree in early winter and the boughs of that tree to
“Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.”
- The reference here is to the abandoned Catholic monasteries where choir boys once sang.

Form vs. Content



- Brooks argues, ““In poetry, I think form and content become pretty thoroughly merged and I prefer not to split them apart; they define each other. A good poem is an object in which form and content can be distinguished but cannot really be separated.”

Text as Language



- Brooks puts it another way when he explains why any paraphrase of a poem must misrepresent it. The poem, he writes, “is not only the linguistic vehicle which conveys the thing communicated most “poetically,” but...it is also the sole linguistic vehicle which conveys the things communicated accurately. In fact, if we are to speak exactly, the poem itself is the only medium that communicates the particular “what” that is communicated.

Text as Language



- Doubtless the meaning of the poem is more important than the meter, and so...we do not have so much a coincidence of two structures accomplished in the same set of words, as we have a logical structure manifesting a musical character which is adventitious, and amounts to a texture for it.