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Aesthetic Confusion: The Legacy of New Criticism

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Introduction

In keeping with this journal's theme of "Revising," this article will explore the current role of one of the major and dominant literary theories that helped shape secondary English through the twentieth century and into the current era: New Criticism. The title of this piece derives from the current state of New Criticism in secondary English classrooms, where it exists as an invisible yet widely used set of tools functionally divorced from the aesthetic theory those tools were designed to promote.

English teachers have the distinction of being the only *core* subject educators to spend a considerable portion of their class time studying works of art. Teachers regularly work with students on interpreting and criticizing poetry, drama, film, visual media, novels, short stories, and many other artistic products. Thus, it makes sense that teachers of literature ought to have a philosophy of aesthetics regarding their chosen craft. For teachers of literature, as teachers of both language and art, there exists a significant benefit to understanding where different literary theories and techniques come from, what implications they hold, and what these implications mean for students (it would be hard to imagine a fine arts teacher who did not regularly evaluate his or her notion of aesthetics).

However, the current state of literature instruction seems to drift toward a disembodied sense of theory. Theories are often engaged unconsciously, reduced to a series of practices, methods, or activities instead of being integrated into the larger discussion of literary or aesthetic philosophy. Put another way, teachers of literature often employ

familiar pedagogical practices as methods or tools, not implementations of an underlying literary philosophy.

This article explores one literary theory, New Criticism, which has been described as having moved into secondary English classroom as early as the 1930s or as late as the 1940s and remained since (Appleman 4; Applebee 164). Regardless of date, nearly all authors point to the strength of the hold New Criticism either exerted or continues to exert on literary interpretations in English classrooms.

New Criticism, though, remains somewhat of a specter in English classrooms. Appleman comments that very few English teachers are consciously aware of New Criticism as a theory or literary movement (4). To most teachers and researchers, the methods of New Criticism are so familiar that these approaches are readily identified as a set of basic practices nearly synonymous with the teaching of English itself. Thus, more often, teachers are likely to engage New Criticism as part of a body of basic practices, familiar from their own secondary and undergraduate experiences, rather than an explicit theory.

Many researchers or teachers may be familiar with New Criticism from recent works such as Tyson's book *Critical Theory Today*, Appleman's book *Critical Encounters in High School English*, or a few other texts that combine discussions of critical literary theory and secondary pedagogy. Teachers and researchers may have knowledge of New Criticism from older, more critical authors and texts, such as Rosenblatt (*The Reader, The Text, The Poem*), Fish (*Is There a Text in this Class*), or Scholes (*Textual Power*). Additionally, many teachers and researchers may be unaware of New Criticism entirely, though I wager that these individuals are intimately familiar with many of the tools and techniques of the New Critics.

In an attempt to reach all of these potential audiences, the first section of this article will detail some of the tenets of New Criticism for two purposes. First, many readers familiar with New Criticism may find it helpful to delve deeper into the history of a theory with which they are already acquainted.

Second, readers who are less aware of New Criticism, its legacy in literary studies and secondary English, and its current widespread use in English classrooms should, I argue, become more familiar with New Criticism as part of an effort to better understand the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of classroom practices surrounding literature study. The second section will focus on the interactions between New Criticism and literature methods in secondary English classrooms. Finally, in an attempt to bring these discussions together, the conclusion of this article will examine the need for a deeper theoretical understanding of the literary philosophies on which many frequently used classroom techniques draw upon.

New Criticism: Definitions and History

The label “New Criticism” seems to be established in common usage by Ransom’s 1941 book *The New Criticism*, though the term was certainly used before this date. The literary movement arguably began in the 1920s at Vanderbilt University, where a small group of literature professionals and students began to work on a method of analyzing literary texts in systematic ways that avoided the problems inherent in the biographical and subjective, gentlemanly trends of the previous decades (Surdulescu).

In order to address the specific concerns lingering from previous critical schools, New Critics, most notably Wimsatt and Beardsley, developed a series of fallacies to govern what a critic or student should not do when engaging in literary interpretation. In response to the over-privileging of fawning biographical criticism that focused on the individual genius of the author, Wimsatt and Beardsley wrote an essay called “The Intentional Fallacy,” which advocated a distance from the author of the text, as such interpretations invariably led the reader to an interpretation that lay beyond the text itself in the realm of psychology and biography. As another example, Wimsatt and Beardsley wrote an essay called “The Affective Fallacy,” which advocated an emotional distance from the text. One who commits the affective fallacy has “a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does),” leading, inevitably, to where “the poem itself...tends to disappear” behind the reader (345). While the affective fallacy has drawn far more criticism over the

years (see Fish; Rosenblatt; and Scholes), proponents of the intentional fallacy have all but disappeared. However, both of these fallacies point to a central tenet of New Criticism: when it comes to reading, a critic needs only the text itself, not anything outside the text.

New Criticism, in the grand scheme of aesthetic theories, is situated as an objective or formalist theory. These theories view meaning as arising from the art-object itself and its formal components rather than as meaning being situated in the perceiver of it. In this, the study of literature for New Critics is prominently the study of the text itself, not the culture or author that produced the text or the experience one has while reading the text. Put another way, Childers and Hentzi cite New Criticism as focusing “on the artistic technique of the text or object under consideration” (116). This emphasis on the object being studied instead of the being studying the object clearly situates New Criticism at odds with subject-oriented, response-based literary theories like Reader Response.

While there have been other formalist and object-centered critical literary movements and personalities in the United States, New Criticism is by far the most pervasive and successful (Singer and Dunn 235). Surdulescu posits that “[o]f all critical doctrines that have prevailed on the English-speaking scene in the postwar decades, the New Criticism is perhaps the best qualified to be called a real school of critical approach to literature.”

Bell-Villada situates New Criticism as a continuation and logical extension of the “Art for Art’s Sake” movement and the theories of the aesthetes of Britain, such as Pater, Ruskin, and Wilde, whose aesthetic belief system demanded only that a work of art be beautiful, not socially responsible or true in any other sense. The New Critics extended this cause by making artistic inquiry more stable and predictable by working to develop a language and pedagogy for uncovering and understanding beauty in literature.

Thus, at its most basic level, New Criticism can be seen as a method of approaching text wherein the critic should

- (1) center his attention on the literary work itself,
- (2) study the various problems arising from examining relationships between a subject matter and the final form of a work, and
- (3) consider ways in which the moral

and philosophical elements get into or are related to the literary work.

(Van O'Connor 489)

Surdulescu builds on this concept when he writes, "New Critics felt it was time to do away with the traditional approaches, which laid emphasis only on the historical, social, biographical or psychological contexts, on the moral or philosophical implications, or still on the textual-linguistic specific factors" of a text. Instead, New Critics favor focusing on the way a text operates as a literary work of art and the way its formal elements combine to create an internally consisted and organic whole. In essence, New Critics were seeking to create a language to describe artistic objects composed of language in the service of providing the best reading possible.

Beardsley, a prominent New Critic, reinforces the notions of unity and support when he writes that experiences with artistic objects, including written texts, are similar in that

(1) [a text] may be more *unified*, that is, more coherent and/or complete, than the other; (2) its dominant quality, or pervasive feeling-tone, may be more *intense* than that of the other; (3) the range or diversity of distinct elements that it brings together into its unity, and under its dominant quality, may be more complex than that of the other. (529)

These recurring points—consistency, unity, quality, attention to the text itself—all establish the most basic element of New Criticism: that the text itself, the object, is the only stable, reliable object of study.

The New Critical attempt to arrive at an objectively reliable interpretation of a text can seem, at least on its surface, problematic. Most of us who work with texts and literature as a profession can find value in disparate works for myriad reasons. Our reactions to these works are certainly personally valid, though they may lack the consistency and rigor sought after by other critics. Additionally, New Criticism stands as a bold affront to a long tradition of subject-oriented aesthetic theory that preceded the movement. Previous generations of aestheticians delighted in the subjectivity of art for its

capricious and unpredictable nature, not to mention art's ability to delight and cause a deep experience, not just an academic assessment.

However, what New Criticism did offer literary scholars and professionals at the time was a consistent method for addressing the recurring concerns of literary texts, a method that first and foremost looked at the text as the source of meaning instead of privileging oneself or connections to the expansive and often contested historical and cultural realities beyond the text. Raleigh comments that New Criticism is a "curious and paradoxical blend of two great and supposedly antithetical forces—art and science, or, more precisely, aestheticism and scientific method" (22). The methods of New Criticism, Raleigh continues, exist "as if Oscar Wilde's festering lily" was "transformed into a hard, sharp, steel scalpel, in a perhaps unconscious desire to acquire protective coloration, borrowed some of the methods and some of the authority of science" (23). This focus addressed the perceived need for a unified perspective on how critical reading ought to take place and how criticism ought to be generated. This seeming opposition of creative art and hard science is a key principle in both New Criticism as a theory and a pedagogical approach, as this dual-nature allowed New Criticism to gain acceptance in secondary schools in the 1940s and 1950s.

Secondary English and New Criticism

As we have seen, the desire to make the practices of literary interpretation more accountable and objective is often cited as the primary intention of New Criticism. Responding to decades of subjective, emotive critical movements that tended to privilege the opinions or personal reactions of the critic, New Critics sought to develop a set of tools to make the interpretation of literature a more stable, scientific practice by focusing solely on the text.

At this point, New Criticism emerges as a more clearly definable pedagogical force. In addition to the general philosophical viewpoints or objectivity and art the New Critics were advancing, they were also advancing a more structured way of looking at texts, a method in every sense of the word. English teacher Miles Myers, who would later go on to become president of NCTE,

discusses the close fit of the methods employed by New Critics and the needs of secondary English teachers. He writes that English teachers, as “the products of the New Criticism, took as our model something like English as science, calling for (1) an objective stance, (2) a constant attention to the text, and (3) an appreciation of form for its own sake” (319). New Critical advocate and educator Van O’Connor comments on how

Each [New C]ritic is attempting to establish a body of definable criteria. A concern with such terms as “tension” and “ambiguity” or “expressive form” and “pseudo-reference” or “paradox” and “irony” implies an attempt to establish a body of criteria. Each critic is concerned to develop techniques that will enable the reader to explore the complex parts of the literary work and to make some attempt to evaluate its worth. (490)

Van O’Connor goes on to list many other terms that New Critics strive to isolate and preserve in a text, ultimately creating a virtual clone of the literary terms sheets, omnipresent in secondary English classrooms in the United States.

This dual attention to scientific methods and artistic stringency gave New Criticism an open invitation to American high schools in the 1950s. One can deduce from multiple histories that, in this era, a desire existed on the part of many policy makers and teachers of literature to employ more rigorous and scientific methods in literature classes to combat a perceived softening of English as a discipline (Applebee). Santora cites the launch of the Soviet Sputnik satellite in 1957 as the metallic and metaphorical harbinger of New Criticism (38). He echoes Applebee’s analysis about the perceived weakness in English methods and how a more rigorous and “scientific” method was needed in the most artistic of the core subjects in schools. Clifford adds that English language arts, “Spurred on by a national insecurity about our scientific pre-eminence a great cry went out for intellectually serious content. University English departments soon adopted the scientific, rigorous techniques of the New Critics” (37).

Ironically, at the same time New Criticism was being ushered in to schools to solve the perceived weakening of standards, the theory was on its way out in

universities and among literary professionals. According to Surdulescu, “By 1955 [New Criticism] had completely lost its innovative image and was regarded by many [in universities] as a dying trend.” The claim of New Criticism’s demise is echoed frequently throughout the historical literature. Nevertheless, what is perhaps more important, at least to the topic of secondary English language arts, is the ready reception of New Criticism into classrooms despite its demise in universities. This isn’t to say that New Criticism had little impact in secondary English classrooms before the late 1950s, but the political turn of events during this time period ensured New Criticism’s broader acceptance as the basics instead of just another tool for interpreting texts. For all the reasons mentioned in the previous two sections—stability, rigor, authority, and accountability—New Criticism was on the fast track to become a major force in secondary English language arts classrooms.

Classroom Tools and Aesthetic Theory

As opposed to the trends in university English departments, where New Criticism was being dismissed as a completed and failed project, the situation in secondary English classrooms was different. Primarily, there has been a decline in the recognition of New Criticism as an explicit textual approach, a trend that mirrors the last several decades in universities. For example, the discussion of New Criticism in the leading journal for secondary school English practitioners, *English Journal*, has been on a steady decline over the past fifty years. In fact, based on a recent review of over seventy years of the publication, most mentions of New Criticism in *English Journal*, however few, are discussed by former teachers-turned-academics, not practicing teachers. As a result of this decline of awareness and continued implementation, the textual methods developed by New Critics have become engrained in the daily activities and materials of English classrooms.

What remains of New Criticism in secondary English classrooms is perhaps more problematic than the far-reaching stranglehold New Criticism held on English during its peak. As mentioned before, New Criticism was primarily a literary and aesthetic philosophy. As an object-

oriented philosophy, New Criticism's methods revolved around a language of accurate description, namely most of the literary terms that are so prevalent in high school critical essays.

While many educators now favor such subjective aesthetic approaches to literature, the New Critical tools that linger in the discipline remain the primary way to examine literature. As early as 1950, experts in the field were predicting the inevitable wholesale adoption of New Criticism by secondary English classrooms. As the editor of *English Journal* writes in a 1950 "The Editor Confides" column:

When the New Criticism is no longer new but has been assimilated into the tradition, we shall have benefited by learning to read poetry somewhat more closely; and the discovery of "internal consistency," upon which the New Critics insist so strongly, will be just as an important main criterion of the correctness of a reader's interpretation rather than a means of interpretation. (103)

This comment points to the methods by which New Criticism has already made its entry into the everyday methods and practices of English: by controlling the language with which students can describe literature, you can steer students toward the New Critical values of close reading, consistency, and standardization of interpretation. Martin further accounts for the resiliency of educational practices in literature instruction when he comments that "We may change our minds; it is much harder to change our habits" (56).

And to a large degree, both authors are correct. Smagorinsky posits that "New Criticism has become ingrained in U.S. schools and the textbook industry" (75). Further, outside the textbook industry, Jones confirms the presence of New Critical methods as the basic tenet of Advanced Placement English courses, materials, and tests. He writes, "each exam is rooted in...what is described as a New Critical approach to literature" (53). Foster continues that the same Advanced Placement exams "reflect a faith in textual autonomy and objectivity," and see "the sum of textual elements that are best studied piece by piece to discover how parts fit together to make a whole," clearly indicating the fixedness of New Critical methods as the

way to a high score on the high-stakes exam (6). Moreover, Tyson adds that the now-ubiquitous method of close textual analysis, "which the New Critics introduced to America and called 'close reading'" and which "has been a standard method of high-school and college instruction for decades" is still widely used in combination with myriad artistic viewpoints, despite the fact that the method was introduced in order to solicit idealized, internally consistent New Critical responses (117). Cain summarizes the point best:

New Criticism survives and is prospering, and it seems to be powerless only because its power is so pervasive that we are ordinarily not even aware of it. So embedded in our work are new Critical attitudes, values, and emphases that we do not even perceive them as the legacy of a particular movement. On the contrary: we feel them as the natural and definitive conditions for criticism in general. It is not simply that the New Criticism has become institutionalized, but that it has gained acceptance as the institution itself. It has, in a word, been transformed into "criticism," the essence of what we do as teachers and critics, the ground upon which everything else is based. (1001)

In essence, the New Critical methods have become the only tool available for all jobs, regardless if we are actually asking students to use a metaphorical rake to dig a hole. This is not necessarily to say that we are at a dead end, bereft of alternatives nor that we should abandon the tool we currently have at our disposal. More, I simply advocate that scholars and teachers who work with and instruct literature should begin to develop a more sound aesthetic value system that avoids the technological determinism offered by continued use of a tool that prescribes certain methods or products of work. Honestly, I cannot say what such an aesthetic viewpoint would look like or that it would even be singular. I can, however, imagine the benefit to students and ourselves as we begin to create a system of criticism and analysis based on an aesthetic philosophy that arises from our values, our beliefs, our passion, and our love of literature instead of continuing to work with tools that were designed for a different project than the one on which we are currently working.

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