

Formalist Criticism for Students: Analyzing Writing Craft

By Tim Gillespie

*[Of] the questions which interest me most when reading a poem . . . the first is technical:
"Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?"*

—W. H. Auden

An Overview and Benefits

Formalism, sometimes called New Criticism (even though it has been around a long time), involves the careful analysis of a literary text's craft. Ignoring any historical context, any biographical information about an author, any philosophical or psychological issues, or even any of a text's political or moral messages, the formalist is simply interested in taking the text apart to see how it works as a piece of art—as an electronics wonk might take a radio apart to see how the radio's components work together without paying attention to the music or news broadcast. In literature, the focus of this detailed examination is to consider the way the components of language—a text's *formal elements*—give form and meaning to the completed literary text.

The formalist strategy for answering that question is a careful scanning of the text, a detailed analysis often called *close reading*. In close reading, one examines a piece of literature closely, seeking to understand its structure, looking for patterns that shape the work and connect its parts to the whole, and searching for uses of language that contribute to the effect.

Formalists, or New Critics, are particularly keen on isolating parts of a text for an intensive look—under the assumption that any small passage can be a microcosm that contains or signals the meaning of the whole, as a single strand of DNA can reveal the genetic code of a whole organism. They tend to pick a few sections of a poem or story, assess the writer's moves, and then try to relate those sections to other sections and to the whole work to determine what principle or theme tied them together. They look at individual words, puzzling out meanings and word histories, considering allusions to other literature, and trying to discern patterns and relationships. They consider the text's form, whether it's a tightly structured rhyming sonnet or an unstructured work of free verse, a chronological realistic novel or a complex modernist fiction that jumps around in time. They look at specific literary devices—paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension. They look at figurative language—images, symbols, metaphors—and language

structures—syntax, diction, rhyme, and rhythm. The way all these formal elements work together are considered to constitute a text's meaning.

New Critics tend to believe that a *best interpretation* of each text can be discovered. In other words, there is generally a single “right” way to interpret each text. But this reading must reflect the text and be supported with evidence from the text and only the text—nothing *off the page*.

These formalist moves have many benefits for young readers. Most important, formalism encourages close, attentive reading. This kind of rigorous analysis can sharpen readers' critical reading and thinking skills.

In addition, the formalist insistence on textual support is helpful reinforcement for good writing habits. Formalism requires that interpretations be validated with specific examples from the text. This is good practice for any argument, whether on an English class paper, a history paper, a letter to an editor, a business proposal, or a political discussion. Formalism demands *textual evidence* to back up assertions, which reinforces a central characteristic of all effective persuasion.

Furthermore, in its analysis of how literature works and how authors create their effects, formalism offers insights to writers. As we assess the moves of professional writers, we are learning moves we can use in our own writing. A formalist focus on the writing craft is as helpful to writers as it is to readers.

Because of its insistence on dealing with the text without any references off the page, formalism requires no research from readers. We don't need to consult other experts or check out the historical or biographical context to interpret, analyze, or evaluate a text. We can simply dig deeply into it.

Limitations and Critiques of Formalist Criticism

Many complaints have been raised about different aspects of formalism.

The New Critics said a text is a crafted object waiting for us to find its single, stable “best meaning.” Doesn't that insistence on an ultimate “correct” reading deny the lovely complexity of much great literature? Can the meaning of a text ever be firmly settled once and for all? Won't it be different for different readers at different times and in different places?

The New Critics asserted that everything off the page is irrelevant, dismissing psychology, philosophy, history, biography, and many other avenues of possible literary discussion inquiry. Does reading really have to be this reductive? Why narrow the joys of literature? Why ignore all these rich aspects of the reading experience? Why ignore the moral and political implications of literature? Why look at artistic craftsmanship only, without considering a text's commentary on the human condition?

Another complaint is that formalist criticism works best with only certain kinds of writing, such as carefully designed texts by writers who love complex formal

structures and devices. This leaves a lot of literature outside the door. What about more spontaneously and loosely crafted texts? What about free-verse poets who rebel against the old traditions of rhyme, meter, and structure, asserting that “form is dead”? What about writers who just aren’t deliberate about their choices?

One final complaint is that the formalist approach can devolve into a hunt for what some readers feel are obscure literary devices (*synecdoche, metonymy, enjambment!*). This can seem nitpicky and trivial. Or, as a student said after taking the formalist-focused AP English Literature exam, “Why didn’t they ask us something *important!*?”

To Sum Up

Formalists love to analyze all the rich devices that writers employ. They remind us not to get distracted from the text by other matters. They encourage us to consider how an understanding of the form and technical artistry of a text is essential to an understanding of its ultimate meaning. Craft and content are not easily separable, they assert. These critics have encouraged us to be more thoughtful, careful readers.