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## What is formalism literary criticism

Summary: This resource will help you begin the process of understanding literary theory and schools of criticism and how they are used in the academy. Formalists disagreed about what specific elements make a literary work "good" or "bad"; but generally, Formalism maintains that a literary work contains certain intrinsic features, and the theory "...defined and addressed the specifically literary qualities in the text" (Richter 699). Therefore, it's easy to see Formalism's relation to Aristotle's theories of dramatic construction. Formalism attempts to treat each work as its own distinct piece, free from its environment, era, and even author. This point of view developed in reaction to "...forms of 'extrinsic' criticism that viewed the text as either the product of social and historical forces or a document making an ethical statement" (699). Formalists assume that the keys to understanding a text exist within "the text itself" (a common saying among New Critics), and thus focus a great deal on, you guessed it, form (Tyson 118). For the most part, traditional Formalism is no longer used in the academy. However, New Critical theories are still sometimes used in secondary- and post-secondary-level instruction in literature and writing (Tyson 115). There has been a renewed interest in form among groups like the New Formalists. Typical questions: How does the work use imagery to develop its own symbols? (i.e. making a certain road stand for death by constant association) What is the quality of the work's organic unity "...the working together of all the parts to make an inseparable whole..." (Tyson 121)? In other words, does how the work is put together reflect what it is? How are the various parts of the work interconnected? How do paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension work in the text? How do these parts and their collective whole contribute to or not contribute to the aesthetic quality of the work? How does the author resolve apparent contradictions within the work? What does the form of the work say about its content? Is there a central or focal passage that can be said to sum up the entirety of the work? How do the rhythms and/or rhyme schemes of a poem contribute to the meaning or effect of the piece? Here is a list of scholars we encourage you to explore to further your understanding of this theory: Russian Formalism Victor Shklovsky Roman Jakobson Victor Erlich - Russian Formalism: History - Doctrine, 1955 Yuri Tynyanov New Criticism John Crowe Ransom - The New Criticism, 1938 I.A. Richards William Empson T.S. Eliot Allen Tate Cleanth Brooks Neo-Aristotelianism (Chicago School of Criticism) R.S. Crane - Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern, 1952 Elder Olson Norman Maclean W.R. Keast Wayne C. Booth - The Rhetoric of Fiction, 1961 Using formalism, a critic can show how the various parts of a work are welded together to make an organic whole. This approach examines a text as a self-contained object; it does not, therefore, concern itself with biographical information about the author, historical events outside of the story, or literary allusions, mythological patterns, or psychoanalytical traits of the characters (except those aspects described specifically in the text.) A formalist critic examines the form of the work as a whole, the form of each individual part of the text (the individual scenes and chapters), the characters, the settings, the tone, the point of view, the diction, and all other elements of the text which join to make it a single text. After analyzing each part, the critic then describes how they work together to make give meaning (theme) to the text. Point of View Setting Characters Plot Symbols Theme A thorough analysis of the text is important to write a good paper here. Remember the judgment you make about a literary work will reflect your own values, biases, and experience; however, you MUST respect the author's words and intentions as presented in the text. Do not analyze a work in terms of what you would like to see; analyze it in terms of what you actually observe. Remember to clearly separate your assumptions from the author's assumptions. Before you begin to write, re-read your notes, considering which approach seems most appropriate. Write your answers to the following questions in FULL sentences. o Did a particular aspect (literary element) of the novel make an impact on me? o What relationships between the various parts of the novel (and literary elements) do I see? o What lesson (meaning or theme) did the author want me to learn from reading this novel? Write a thesis which clearly and directly states the point you want to make about the novel. Consider this example of a thesis statement: Example 1: Setting in "A Worn Path" by Eudora Welty is effective: the descriptions are beautiful. Next underline key words: Setting in "A Worn Path" by Eudora Welty is effective: the descriptions are beautiful. Answer these questions about the example: 1. Does this thesis limit and focus what the writer has to say about the story? Definitely not! This thesis (and I use the term loosely) is very vague. The key terms are so general that they fail to provide any focus for the paper. To provide specific examples to support this statement will be very difficult. 2. Can this thesis help to explicate the novel's theme? Again, this statement has no real connection to what the author is saying (the meaning) in the story. Example 2: Eudora Welty uses the setting of "A Worn Path," presented in the vivid descriptive phrases of the protagonist's strenuous journey through the wild country of Natchez Trace, to connect the reader with Phoenix, both as a character and as a symbol. 1. Does this thesis limit and focus what the writer has to say about this story? Yes! This paper will give examples from the text which show how the description of the setting (during this character's journey) characterize the protagonist as a person and a symbol. In addition, repetition of the underlined key words will help this writer build coherence in the paper. 2. Can this thesis help to explicate the novel's meaning (theme)? No, at least not directly. While connecting the setting along the journey to the main character will definitely get at the author's theme, the theme is not made clear. In fact, though both the character and the symbolism, almost assures this paper will discuss theme, the actual reference to the story's theme is missing. However, this thesis would address the assignment response for looking at form (structure) and how the story is built. Example 3: Through Phoenix's strenuous journey in the wild country of Natchez Trace, Eudora Welty uses her protagonist to symbolically show the struggle of African-Americans toward equality and integration in the South after the Civil War. 1. Does this thesis limit and focus what the writer has to say about this story? Yes! This paper will give examples from the text showing how the character's journey symbolizes the African-Americans struggle for equality and integration. Repetition of the underlined key words will help this writer build coherence in the paper. 2. Can this thesis help to explicate the novel's meaning (theme)? Yes! It connects the setting with the symbolic journey to get at the author's theme. In fact, looking at the journey, the character and the symbolism almost assures this paper will discuss theme. This thesis would address the assignment response for looking at meaning (theme). Once you have arrived at the thesis, make a brief outline of the examples (including quotes and paraphrases--and page numbers for each) which will support the thesis you have written. After preparing an optional outline, complete with examples, begin writing the paper. Always avoid allowing the quotes and paraphrases from the text to take over the paper. You are the critic, and this paper is YOUR formalist interpretation of the novel. Quote only the words necessary to make your point; avoid long passage of dialog, etc. Also use the specific quotes and paraphrases as support for YOUR ideas and always interpret them for the reader, by showing how the quoted material connects to the point you are making. Do not expect a reader to interpret a scene or event from the text in the same way that you have. Always make the connections for the reader. What is the point of view? Point of view is the viewpoint from which you view the setting, see the action, observe the characters, and hear the conversations. Depending on the powers the author has granted this narrator, you may even be able to see inside a character's mind, learning what he or she thinks and feels. (. . .ever wish we all had these powers. . .?) In first person point of view, "I" and "we" are used. Sometimes the first person narrator is a participant in the story of the novel; sometimes, he/she is an observer. The reliability of first person narrators should be evaluated on the basis of their involvement in the story). In third person point of view, "he," "she," and "they" are used. Third person narrators may be omniscient (all-knowing), offering editorial comments on or an objective report of the characters and situations. Third person narrators may also be limited omniscient, functioning as a sort of central intelligence, though limited by the fact that they are also a character in the story; hence, they usually cannot see into minds, know the future, etc. A note of caution--It is important to avoid confusing the narrator with the author in reading fiction. Ask yourself the following questions in analyzing point of view: How does the author's choice of point of view affect the reader's understanding and feelings about the story? Does the point of view in the novel have a particular use? What advantages does the author gain by using this viewpoint? What changes in the novel would have to be made if the point of view were changed? Does the author's choice of point of view reveal or illuminate his/her theme? What is the setting? Setting is more than just the place and time a story takes place. Setting also includes the atmosphere: the social and cultural context of the story. A novel may have many settings or occur at different times; however, each time and place were selected by the author for a particular reason. As yourself the following questions: Does the setting play an important role in revealing any element of the novel? What information does the setting give me about a situation or a character? What influence does the setting have on the characters or their actions? Does the setting contribute to the novel's theme? Characters are the lifeblood of every novel, and some characters are more important than others. Characters may be round (more like real life with positive and negative traits) or flat (usually stereotypes that symbolize a certain type of person/place/thing). Characters may also be dynamic (changing and growing as the novel's events unfold) or static (those who remain unchanged no matter what happens to them). In addition, note the following important character types as you read through the novel: the protagonist - the main character around whom the novel's action revolves (usually), Don't be trapped into thinking this character must be human because he/she/it may not be. the antagonist - the important character with whom the protagonist is locked in conflict. The antagonist may be a person or some other animate life form (or a collection of said life forms), a place, or a thing. the foil - a minor character (usually who is offered as a contrast to point out or emphasize a distinctive characteristic of the protagonist. Ask yourself the following questions about the important characters of the novel? 4. Are the character physically described? How detailed are these descriptions, and who gives them to you? (a narrator? or another character? reliability?) 5. How do the character's words and actions characterize him/her/it? 6. What is the character's motivation for the decisions and actions he/she/it makes? 7. Are the character's actions believable, given the setting and situations in the novel? 8. How do the characters, their actions and motivations, contribute to the novel's theme? What are symbols? Symbols extend beyond one-to-one comparison. Be cautious when looking for symbols. A symbol is a like signpost, used and oftentimes repeated at key junctures, that alludes to a larger meaning than the signpost normally would indicate. Symbols can be public or private. Public symbols have traditional meanings. The rose which is a well-known symbol of love, and the apple is a religious symbol for forbidden knowledge as in the Adam and Eve story. Private symbols can mean anything the author wishes them to mean, and this meaning is only apparent from the way in which they are used in the novel. Sometimes authorial and traditional symbols merge having both the traditional meaning, and one that is more closely related to the novel. Symbols most often reveal characters to us and/or strongly allude to the theme of a novel. Readers of a novel may not always agree on a particular symbol's interpretation or even if a particular item is a symbol, so be careful to offer plenty of supporting evidence and reasoning to back up both your selection and interpretation of any symbol. Theme is the point of the book, the author's message to us: the readers. Theme is often complex, and thus, it may be difficult for two people out of ten to interpret the same theme. Though certain readers may see similar themes, most likely the themes they interpret will be different in some way or another to varying degrees. Hence, theme is a matter of individual interpretation. However, the interpreter must not be too cavalier in assuming he/she can choose any theme whatsoever. The theme must logically come from the text; therefore, the theme must be supportable by using specific text examples. Care should be given to interpreting these specific text examples in the context that they are used in the novel. Care should also be given to avoid "stretching" or "reaching" too far to make a text example fit into our interpretation of the theme. In addition, the wise reader/interpreter will avoid associating the author or the author's life too closely with the main character or his/her life. Questions to ask to get to the theme: 1. What lesson does the author want me (the reader) to learn from this book? 2. What lesson does the author want me (the reader) to learn about life? \* Important note - Be doubly sure to state the theme in an arguable statement. See the following examples: In Way of the Peaceful Warrior, Dan Millman writes about living in the present. (This statement is not a theme; it announces the topic but does not make an arguable statement about it.) In Way of the Peaceful Warrior, Dan Millman concludes that living in the present is the key to unreasonable happiness. (This statement gives us the topic "living in the present" and makes a point about it "is the key unreasonable happiness")



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