

Sample New Criticism Summary

New Criticism is a brand of literary theoretical criticism popularized in the first half of the twentieth century but subsequently replaced with other, more culturally and politically relevant theoretical approaches later on. New Criticism came about after the devastation of World War I in Europe (and by extension America), where literary critics turned to a more humane past, searching classic poems and novels for stable truths and more innocent versions of beauty. They eschewed with a vengeance the gritty, desperate post-war realities extant in Europe and America at the time. This approach wants to examine what it calls the “great works” (classical works of poetry and prose, usually) of Western literature because it believes that the finest expressions of art and truth reside in those works alone. In New Criticism, the feelings of the author as well as the reader are disregarded; instead, only the work itself is analyzed because the truth resides only in the work (hence their mantra about great truths being found only in great works). To do their analysis work, New Critics focus on an author's use of certain storytelling devices that, when manipulated well by the author, reveal what practitioners like to call the “organic unity” of the whole. They look for multiple levels of meaning and central “tensions and ambiguities” that structure the narrative, and that then get resolved in the final lines of a work, often in ironic fashion, to reveal transcendent truths. Formal literary devices like tone, irony, voice, point of view, metaphor, symbol, and characterization are the aspects of story that New Critics examine in order to “interpret” it for the rest of us. An author’s skillful use of these devices puts the reader into a certain tranquil state of mind, making it impossible after a certain point to objectively view a well-told story any longer without getting pulled into its artful orbit and being ultimately, inexplicable transformed by the skill and the beauty evident in the author’s storytelling abilities.