



AUTONOMOUS LITERATURE: THE ROLE OF FORM AND STRUCTURE IN NEW CRITICISM

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Abstract:

This paper examines the concept of autonomous literature within the framework of New Criticism, which advocates for the text as an independent and self-contained entity. It argues that the meaning and interpretation of a literary work should not rely on external factors such as the author's intentions, historical context, or the reader's personal experiences. Instead, meaning is embedded within the language, structure, and formal elements of the text itself. By exploring the rejection of biographical criticism, historical context, and reader-response theory, this paper demonstrates how New Criticism emphasizes the unity of form and meaning, allowing critics to focus on the text's intrinsic qualities. Through close reading and analysis of various literary works, including *Moby-Dick*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Macbeth*, and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the paper underscores how the autonomy of the text enables a more objective and systematic interpretation of literature, independent of external influences.

Keywords:

New Criticism, autonomous text, biographical criticism, historical context, reader-response criticism, close reading, form and meaning, literary analysis, symbolism, literary theory

INTRODUCTION

The concept of autonomy in literature, especially within New Criticism, argues that the meaning and interpretation of a text should not rely on external factors like the author's intentions, historical context, or the reader's personal emotions. Instead, it emphasizes that the text itself is an independent and self-contained entity, and all the necessary elements to understand its meaning are embedded within its language, structure, and form. This view challenges earlier literary theories that often sought to interpret texts through the lens of biography, history, or reader response. In New Criticism, the text is seen as its own autonomous object, with meaning emerging from its formal qualities rather than external influences. The following sections explore the separation of the text from the author, history, and reader, which are key external contexts discussed in the concept of an autonomous text.

One of the fundamental aspects of the autonomous text in New Criticism is the rejection of biographical criticism. Biographical criticism asserts that understanding an author's life, motivations, or intentions is crucial to interpreting a work. New Criticism refutes this notion, emphasizing that the text itself holds intrinsic meaning, and the critic's task is to analyze how the text functions independently, without reference to the author's personal background or intentions.

In W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's influential essay, *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946), they argue:

“One must ask not what the author meant but what the work means.”
(Wimsatt and Beardsley 46)

This quote highlights the belief that meaning should be sought within the text itself, not by speculating about the author's life or intentions. Once a work is published, it is considered a separate entity, independent of its creator. This encourages critics to focus on the internal elements of the text—such as structure, language, and symbolism—to uncover its meaning. For example, when reading Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, critics should focus on the narrative structure, the symbolism of the whale, and the character of Captain Ahab without delving into Melville's personal beliefs or the circumstances of his life. The text is treated as its own autonomous object, allowing critics to engage with it on its own terms, rather than through the lens of the author's life or views (Spante et al. 151).



Another essential element of the autonomy of the text is its separation from historical context. Historical criticism posits that understanding the historical period in which a work was written is essential for interpreting the text. However, New Criticism asserts that a text's meaning is not dependent on historical knowledge, but rather on its formal qualities—its structure, language, and literary devices. In Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), he argues that the text should be viewed as a self-contained object:

“A poem is not a mere sum of its parts; rather, it is a whole, where every element contributes to the overall meaning, and the meaning is inseparable from the form of the work itself.” (Brooks 47)

This quote emphasizes the idea that the form of the text—its structure, language, and literary devices—are more important for understanding the meaning than any historical context. For instance, although Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* is deeply rooted in the French Revolution, its meaning is not solely shaped by this historical backdrop. Through close reading, critics can uncover themes like rebirth, sacrifice, and social justice, regardless of the historical events surrounding its creation. In this way, New Criticism urges readers to focus on the text's intrinsic qualities—its structure, tone, and symbolism—rather than understanding the historical moment in which the work was written. This view emphasizes the universality of a text's themes, suggesting that meaning can be derived from the work itself, independent of its specific historical context.

The reader's response to a text is another factor that New Criticism separates from the autonomous text. Reader-response criticism claims that a text's meaning is shaped by the individual reader's experiences and subjective interpretation. However, New Criticism argues that the meaning of the text is not dependent on the reader's emotions or personal reactions but emerges from the internal elements of the text itself. In I.A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929), he discusses how readers often bring their own emotional responses and biases into their interpretations, which can distort the true meaning of the text:

“The critic must take the poem as it stands, as a unit, and avoid extraneous knowledge and influences that may distort the text's intrinsic meaning.” (Richards 29)

Richards emphasizes that the reader's emotions and personal experiences should not interfere with the objective analysis of the text. Instead, meaning is embedded in the language, structure, and literary devices of the text, and the critic's role is to interpret it based on these intrinsic qualities. For example, when reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, critics should focus on Hamlet's soliloquies, the language of the play, and the motifs of death and revenge, rather than being influenced by how modern readers might personally react to these themes. By concentrating on the intrinsic qualities of the text, critics can interpret the work objectively, without being swayed by personal feelings or biases (Findler, Schönherr, Lozano, & Stacherl 14). This approach allows for a universal understanding of the text that is not dependent on the individual reader's perspective. The autonomy of the text is a central idea within New Criticism, emphasizing that a text should be understood as a self-contained object that exists independently of the author, historical context, or reader's emotional response. The meaning of the text is embedded in its structure, language, and form, and the critic's task is to analyze these internal elements to uncover the true significance of the work. By rejecting the influence of external contexts, New Criticism encourages readers to engage with the intrinsic qualities of the work itself, allowing for a more objective and systematic interpretation of literature. Through this approach, New Criticism offers a way to study texts that is focused on their internal unity and formal qualities, ensuring that the meaning is drawn from the work itself, independent of authorial, historical, or reader-based influences.

The concept of treating a text as self-contained and self-sufficient is foundational to New Criticism, which emerged as a literary movement in the early 20th century. This approach fundamentally rejects the use of external factors—such as the author's biography, historical context, or the reader's personal emotions—in the interpretation of a literary work. Instead, New Critics assert that the meaning of a work is inherent and fully embedded within its structure, language, and formal qualities. The text is considered a self-contained entity, existing independently of external influences. By viewing the text in this way, critics are encouraged to focus solely on the internal dynamics



of the text, such as its symbols, motifs, patterns, and formal features, to uncover the deeper meanings within the work. As W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley argue in their influential essay *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946):

“One must ask not what the author meant but what the work means.”
(*Wimsatt & Beardsley 46*)

This quotation asserts that the meaning of the text should be sought not through speculative questions about the author’s intentions or personal life, but by closely examining the text itself. Once a work is published, it becomes a separate entity from its creator, and New Criticism contends that the critic’s task is to interpret and analyze the text based purely on its formal characteristics. These include language, structure, symbolism, and themes, which the critic interprets without the need to reference the author’s intentions or the historical period in which the text was written. This shift in focus from the external world to the text itself allows critics to engage with the work on its own terms, discovering its intrinsic meaning through a focused, methodical analysis of its internal elements. This approach emphasizes close reading, an analytical method that prioritizes understanding the formal elements of the text, ensuring that critics are interpreting the work based on its intrinsic qualities rather than external influences. As I.A. Richards points out in *Practical Criticism* (1929), critics are instructed to engage with the text on its own terms:

“The critic must take the poem as it stands, as a unit, and avoid extraneous knowledge and influences that may distort the text’s intrinsic meaning.” (*Richards 9*)

Richards stresses that interpretation must focus on the language, structure, and tone of the text itself, without relying on external knowledge about the author’s life or the historical moment in which the work was created. The critic’s role is to engage deeply with the formal features—syntax, diction, tone, and symbols—which, when examined closely, reveal the true meaning of the text. The text, in this view, functions as a complete unit, and the critic must analyze the way its parts work together to communicate a cohesive meaning. This approach eliminates the need for biographical or historical context, allowing for a more objective, systematic, and universal interpretation of the text. By treating the text as self-sufficient, New Criticism also allows for the discovery of universal themes within a work, which transcend the historical context or the authorial intentions that might have originally influenced the creation of the text. For example, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, a New Critical reading would focus on how the play’s language, symbols, and motifs of ambition, guilt, and fate are carefully intertwined to communicate the text’s tragic themes. In particular, consider this famous soliloquy from *Macbeth* in Act V, Scene V:

“Out, out brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow...”

(*Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act V, Scene V*)

This line can be analyzed through the lens of New Criticism by examining how Shakespeare’s word choice—such as “brief” and “walking shadow”—conveys the transitory nature of life and the insubstantiality of human existence. The critic focuses on how these words symbolize the play’s themes of mortality and the fleeting nature of life, without needing to delve into Shakespeare’s own views on power or the Elizabethan era. Through this approach, the formal structure—word choice, symbolism, and tone—shapes the text’s meaning. By isolating the text from its historical context and authorial biography, critics can analyze the universal themes of the play, such as the tragic consequences of unchecked ambition and the inevitability of death, without the need for external factors to guide their interpretation. Similarly, Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, despite being deeply embedded in the historical and political context of the French Revolution, can be analyzed through a New Critical lens without relying heavily on knowledge of the Revolution (Foucault 18). A critic focusing on the formal qualities of the text would examine the motifs of resurrection and sacrifice, which recur throughout the novel, looking at how these symbols and narrative structures help to communicate themes of moral redemption, social justice, and personal sacrifice. For example, the character of Dr. Manette, who is imprisoned for many years but is later revived through the love of his daughter, Lucie, serves as a symbol of resurrection. A New Critical reading would consider how these symbols and the structure of the narrative communicate the novel’s broader themes of personal and societal rebirth, without



requiring a deep understanding of the historical events of the French Revolution. By focusing on the intrinsic qualities of the text—language, structure, symbolism, and narrative organization—the critic is able to uncover the text's meaning, rooted in the text itself, rather than the historical events that surrounded its creation.

The self-contained nature of the text also leads to a more objective and systematic interpretation. For instance, in T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the irregular meter and disjointed rhyme scheme reflect the fragmented and alienated thoughts of the protagonist, contributing to the poem's themes of isolation, uncertainty, and psychological fragmentation. A close examination of these formal qualities helps to convey the inner turmoil of Prufrock's character. The poem's structure reflects its themes, and the critic can trace these connections without needing to refer to Eliot's personal life or the historical context of early 20th-century England. This method of focusing on internal elements—such as the meter, rhyme, and symbolism—allows the critic to arrive at a universal understanding of the poem's meaning without the need for any external context or emotional bias.

Ultimately, New Criticism advocates for an interpretation that is deeply rooted in the text itself. By treating the text as self-sufficient, critics can explore its intrinsic qualities—its language, structure, symbols, and themes—to uncover the meaning that is contained within the work. This approach ensures that the meaning is derived from the internal elements of the text, free from the influence of external factors like the author's biography, historical context, or the reader's emotional responses. By focusing solely on the formal aspects of the work, New Criticism allows for a more objective, systematic, and universal interpretation, ensuring that the meaning of the text is understood through its self-contained qualities, rather than through the lens of external circumstances (Guillory 21).

The unity of form and meaning is a fundamental concept in New Criticism and is vital to understanding how literature conveys its true significance. Form refers to the text's structure, language, rhetorical devices, and the stylistic choices that shape how it communicates its themes, symbols, and meanings. New Critics argue that form and meaning are inseparable; they work together in a unified system that helps express the text's message. The idea is that every part of a literary work contributes to its overall meaning, and a critic's task is to explore how the formal elements of the text—its structure, symbolism, metaphors, rhyme schemes, and syntax—create a unified and coherent meaning. According to Cleanth Brooks, who played a key role in the development of New Criticism, in his book *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), he states:

“A poem is not a mere sum of its parts; rather, it is a whole, where every element contributes to the overall meaning, and the meaning is inseparable from the form of the work itself.” (Brooks 47)

This unity of form and meaning is crucial to New Criticism, as it underscores the belief that the text's form is not just a container for ideas but is essential to the text's interpretation. Brooks suggests that the structure and elements of a work are deeply intertwined, meaning that form cannot be separated from the message or themes of the text. The critic's role, then, is to carefully analyze how these elements work together, rather than considering them in isolation. By examining how the formal elements of a work contribute to its meaning, critics can gain a fuller understanding of the work's significance and its underlying themes. For example, in T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the irregular meter and enjambment (where lines flow into the next without punctuation) are crucial formal devices that mirror the fragmented, disjointed thoughts of the protagonist, Prufrock. The form of the poem, with its shifting rhythm and lack of clear structure, emphasizes Prufrock's uncertainty and alienation. The disjointed flow of the poem, which breaks from traditional rhyme schemes and meters, reflects the protagonist's inner turmoil. Prufrock's fragmented thoughts, expressed through this unconventional form, symbolize the fragmented nature of his identity and psyche (Hardy 220). By analyzing the form of the poem—its irregular structure and disrupted rhythm—critics can understand how these formal choices contribute to the meaning of isolation and self-doubt that dominate the poem. In William Blake's *The Tyger*, the poem's form—its rhymed quatrains and forceful repetition—enhances the powerful symbolism of the tiger. The regular structure of the poem reflects the order and precision of the divine act of creation, while the repeated questioning of the tiger's creator introduces a tension between mystery and understanding. Blake's use of language and meter highlights the ambivalence of the tiger's creation, simultaneously evoking awe and fear. This formal structure—combined with the vivid imagery of the tiger's eyes



and ferocity—reinforces the central themes of the poem about the divine power of creation, beauty, and danger. Blake's use of form here is not just a stylistic choice, but a way to communicate the deeper moral and philosophical questions about the relationship between creation and destruction, innocence and experience.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the use of soliloquies and the structure of the tragedy are key to understanding the themes of ambition, guilt, and fate. Macbeth's famous soliloquy:

“Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow...” (*Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act V, Scene V*)

exemplifies how the form of the speech itself—the brevity of the words and the metaphoric imagery—conveys the transience of life. The metaphor of the “brief candle” represents the fleeting nature of existence, while the “walking shadow” underscores the insubstantiality of human life. Through this formal structure—the metaphor, the brevity, and the choice of words—Shakespeare uses the language of the soliloquy to emphasize the meaning of life's futility and the tragic consequences of Macbeth's unchecked ambition. The form here amplifies the themes of mortality, guilt, and the inevitability of death, making the meaning of the play more profound and resonant.

The principle of unity between form and meaning stresses that the formal structure of a work is not a secondary feature, but a vital part of how the work communicates its message. New Critics argue that a text's meaning is deeply intertwined with the form in which it is expressed. They assert that a work's formal elements—whether its structure, language, or rhetorical devices—actively contribute to and shape its meaning (Hohendahl 287). The meaning cannot be fully understood without paying attention to how these formal elements work together in a unified, cohesive way. For instance, John Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*, a New Critical reading would focus on how the language and structure of the poem express the tension between the impermanence of human life and the eternity of art. The stanzas are tightly structured, each building on the previous one, and the language of the poem shifts from lightness to heaviness, mimicking the mental journey of the speaker. The poem's formal elements mirror its theme: the transient nature of human existence versus the idea of art's permanence. The form and content of the poem work in tandem to enhance the theme of the immortality of poetry and the transitory nature of human experience.

Similarly, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* employs symbolism and form to reveal the decay of the American Dream. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock is one of the novel's key symbols, representing Gatsby's unachievable dreams of love and success. In the novel's final chapters, when Gatsby's dream is finally shattered, the form of the narrative, with its nonlinear structure and fragmented timelines, reflects the disillusionment and collapse of the American Dream. By examining the formal elements of narrative structure, symbolism, and language, critics can uncover the meaning of the novel, understanding how Gatsby's dream reflects the larger societal illusions that dominate the Jazz Age, and ultimately, the futility of the American Dream. Through this focused analysis, the critic can trace how form and meaning work together to express the novel's central themes.

One of the crucial aspects of New Criticism is the recognition of how formal devices—such as metaphor, irony, imagery, and symbolism—are integral to conveying a text's meaning. These devices are not simply embellishments of the text but fundamental tools through which the meaning is created. For example, irony is a formal device that is critical in works like George Orwell's *1984*. The Party's slogans:

"War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength." (*Orwell 48, 49*)

are examples of irony that expose the contradictory nature of the totalitarian regime. These formal devices reflect the novel's central themes of thought control, totalitarianism, and the manipulation of truth. The ironic slogans underscore the paradoxical nature of the regime and its ability to distort reality, shaping the reader's understanding of the text's critique of authoritarianism. Irony in this case is not merely an embellishment, but a key formal device that deepens the meaning and message of the novel. Similarly, in Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, the carriage ride serves as a metaphor for the journey towards death, and the personification of Death as a gentleman adds a sense of calm, inevitability, and even civility to the idea of death. Dickinson's use of form—the



metaphor, personification, and the calm rhythmic flow of the poem—reinforces the theme of death as an inevitable journey, which makes it all the more powerful. Without these formal devices, the meaning of the poem would not have the same emotional depth. New Criticism asserts that form and meaning are inseparable. Every element of a text's form—its structure, language, rhetoric, and symbols—is essential in expressing its meaning. By analyzing how these elements work together to create a unified whole, critics can uncover deeper insights into the text's themes and ideas. The form of a text is not just a passive vessel for its content; it is an active and necessary component of the work's meaning. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Eliot's *Prufrock*, and Dickinson's poetry, the form is inseparable from the meaning and themes that each work conveys. The critic's task is to explore how these formal elements contribute to the text's overall significance, leading to a more objective and universal interpretation of the text. Through this method, New Criticism shows that the unity of form and meaning is vital to understanding the true depth of a literary work, allowing critics to engage with the text in a way that reveals its full richness and complexity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, New Criticism's emphasis on the autonomy of the text offers a valuable framework for literary analysis, advocating for the separation of a text from external influences such as the author's biography, historical context, or the reader's personal emotions. By focusing on the intrinsic qualities of language, structure, and form, critics are able to uncover the meaning embedded within the text itself, allowing for a more objective and systematic interpretation. This approach not only ensures that the text is treated as a self-contained entity but also highlights the unity between form and meaning, reinforcing the belief that every element of the text contributes to its overall significance. Through close reading and formal analysis, New Criticism provides a path for understanding literature on its own terms, revealing universal themes and deeper insights that transcend external contexts.

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