

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries witnessed a radical transformation in the study of literature. Traditional literary criticism, which focused on moral evaluation, authorial biography, and historical context, gradually gave way to theoretical frameworks that sought to analyze literature scientifically, philosophically, politically, and culturally. Literary theory emerged as a distinct discipline influenced by developments in linguistics, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and political theory.

Modern and contemporary critical theories have reshaped the way literature is read, interpreted, and taught, moving from text-centred analysis to reader-centred, culture-centred, and technology-driven approaches. This essay presents a chronological and descriptive analysis of the major modern and contemporary critical theories in English literature, highlighting their historical development, key thinkers, core concepts, and significance. The chronological development of modern and contemporary critical theories in English literature reflects the intellectual history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From Formalism and New Criticism's focus on textual autonomy to Structuralism's linguistic systems, from post-structuralism's scepticism about meaning to Marxist, Feminist, and Postcolonial critiques of power, literary theory has continually expanded its scope and methodologies.

Contemporary theories such as ecocriticism, digital humanities, and posthumanism demonstrate that literary studies remain dynamic and interdisciplinary. Thus, modern and contemporary critical theories not only provide tools for textual analysis but also reflect broader cultural, political, and technological transformations in human thought.

Early Modern Phase: Formalism and New Criticism (1910s-1950s)

Russian Formalism

Russian Formalism emerged in the early twentieth century in Russia as one of the first systematic attempts to study literature scientifically. It developed through groups such as the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the OPOJAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language).

*The formalists, including Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Boris Eichenbaum, rejected biographical and sociological criticism. Instead, they focused on the **literariness** of literature—what makes a text literary rather than non-literary. Shklovsky introduced the concept of*

defamiliarization (ostranenie), arguing that literature disrupts habitual perception and makes ordinary objects appear strange and fresh.

Russian Formalism also distinguished between *fabula (story)* and *sjuzhet (plot)*, emphasizing narrative techniques such as foregrounding, parallelism, and poetic devices. Their work laid the foundation for later structuralist and linguistic theories.

New Criticism

New Criticism developed in the Anglo-American academic world during the 1920s to 1950s. Major figures include T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, and W.K. Wimsatt. This school emphasized **close reading** and the autonomy of the literary text.

New Critics argued that a literary work should be analyzed as a self-contained entity, independent of the author's intention or the reader's emotional response. Wimsatt and Beardsley formulated the concepts of **intentional fallacy** and **affective fallacy**, which discouraged reliance on authorial intent and reader reaction.

The New Critics focused on irony, ambiguity, paradox, and tension within the text and advocated the idea of **organic unity**, where all parts of the text contribute to a unified whole. This approach dominated English departments for decades and established literary studies as a rigorous academic discipline.

Structuralism and Psychoanalysis (1950s-1970s)

Structuralism

Structuralism emerged in the mid-twentieth century under the influence of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's theory of language as a system of signs, composed of signifiers and signifieds, influenced many disciplines, including literary studies.

Structuralist critics such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Tzvetan Todorov argued that literature is governed by underlying structures similar to language. They analyzed myths, narratives, and genres through **binary oppositions** and narrative codes.

Structuralism sought to uncover universal patterns and deep structures in literature, emphasizing systems rather than individual texts.

Narratology, a structuralist subfield, studied narrative structures, plot patterns, and character functions.

Psychoanalytic Criticism

Psychoanalytic criticism draws on the theories of Sigmund Freud and later Jacques Lacan. Freud believed that literature expresses unconscious desires, repression, dreams, and psychological conflicts. Critics used Freudian concepts such as the Oedipus complex, id, ego, and superego to interpret literary characters and authors.

*Jacques Lacan reinterpreted Freud through linguistics and structuralism. He argued that the unconscious is structured like a language and introduced concepts such as the **mirror stage**, **symbolic order**, and **the Other**. Psychoanalytic criticism thus explored the relationship between language, identity, and desire in literature.*

Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction (1960s-1980s)

Post-Structuralism

Post-structuralism emerged as a reaction against the rigid structures proposed by structuralism. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida challenged the idea of stable meaning and universal structures.

*Barthes proclaimed the “**Death of the Author**,” arguing that the author does not control the meaning of the text; instead, meaning is produced by language and readers. Foucault examined the relationship between discourse and power, showing how knowledge and language are shaped by social institutions.*

Post-structuralism emphasized plurality, instability, and the socially constructed nature of meaning.

V. Feminist Theories (1960s-Present)

Feminist Criticism

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*Feminist criticism emerged during the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, argued that women are socially constructed as “the Other.” Critics like Kate Millett and Elaine Showalter analyzed patriarchal representations of women in literature and advocated the recovery of women writers.*

*Showalter developed **Gynocriticism**, which focused on women’s writing and female literary traditions. French feminists such as Hélène Cixous proposed *écriture féminine*, a feminine mode of writing that challenges patriarchal language.*

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the environment. Critics like Lawrence Buell analyze representations of nature, ecological crises, and environmental ethics. This theory has gained importance in the context of climate change and the Anthropocene.