

# The Relationship between Practical Criticism and New Criticism

**N**ew Criticism is the development of the Practical Criticism approach by American critics and poets. R. C. Murfin, R. C. and S. M. Ray describe what New Criticism is within *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. 'The foundations of the New Criticism were laid in books and essays written during the 1920s and 1930s by I. A. Richards (*Practical Criticism* [1929]), William Empson (*Seven Types of Ambiguity* [1930]), and T. S. Eliot ("The Function of Criticism" [1933]).' New Criticism regards literature as an independent item. Murfin and Ray continue to state that: 'rather than basing their interpretations of a text on the reader's response, the author's stated intentions, or parallels between the text and historical contexts, New Critics perform a close reading, concentrating on the relationships within the text that give it its own distinctive character or form.' Although we associate New Criticism with certain principles and terms—such as *affective fallacy* (the notion that the reader's response is relevant to the meaning of a work) and *intentional fallacy* (the notion that the author's intention determines the work's meaning)—the New Critics were trying to make a cultural statement rather than to establish a critical dogma.



Practical Criticism is a form of close reading and is related to developing the skill of being able to critically analyse texts (usually poetry) on early readings. It originated with Richards and it is the way that one can come up with analytical and interesting points about a piece on first reading, rather than getting into the academic exercise of theoretical criticism. The main ideology behind Practical Criticism is rather than concentrating on the author or the social context, you focus purely on the text itself and the lexis itself. According to Peter Barry's *Beginning theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 'the job of criticism is to interpret the text, to mediate between it and the reader.' Practical Criticism perceives literature as a vehicle for transmitting universal truths and eternal values, considering that the meaning of a text remains constant throughout time, and is there to be extracted from the text.

Richards gave students poems in which information about the author and date were left out on purpose. He went on to analyse the student opinions. He reported the results in *Practical Criticism: a Study of Literary Judgment*, (1929). What was apparent throughout was many fluent and avid readers failed to understand what the poems were about.

When asked to write about *Spring Quiet* by Christina Rossetti, (although they did not know who wrote it or when) two students responded;

"It has little merit - parts of it are deplorable. The first two verses are quite attractive, and the rhyme 'thrush' with 'bush' is almost bearable. When 'boughs' and 'house' come next however, the attempt to enjoy the poem fails. There are not only poor rhymes, there is also much poverty of thought and much real silliness in the poem."

And "The first 2 lines are not sense. I laughed at the rhyming of thrush and bush; and boughs and

rhyming of thrush and bush; and boughs and house. Reminds one quite pleasantly of the 'poetry' one wrote when aged ten." (Richards, *Practical Criticism: a Study of Literary Judgment*)

Richards commentates that, 'reminders of our own poetic efforts, not only at the age of ten but even in years closer at hand, have an inevitable influence on our judgment, a useful influence when it keeps within its province, but dangerous when it meddles with matters beyond it. All but a very few beginners in verse find rhyming a great strain upon their verbal ingenuity and attention.' (Richards, *Practical*, p. 33)

Intentional fallacy and affective fallacy are two terms introduced by Wimsatt and Beardsley to juxtapose popular beliefs such as to know what the author intended with the text is to fully comprehend the text itself and judging a poem erroneously, based on the emotional response of the reader. Delahoyde states within *New Criticism: Introduction to Literature* that 'the "intentional fallacy" is when one confuses the meaning of a work with the author's purported intention (expressed in letters, diaries, interviews, for example).' Therefore showing that New Critics believe that the work isn't related to the author as such and is completely unconnected. 'The "affective fallacy" is the erroneous practice of interpreting texts according to the psychological or emotional responses of readers, confusing the text with its results.' New Critics believe that the text is a stand-alone piece, and should be treated as such. In continuation, Murfin and Ray state within their glossary of critical and literary terms that 'New Criticism regards poems as having elaborately structured, complex meanings with a relative disregard for their historical context.' In this regard, New Criticism is similar to Practical Criticism as the latter also focused on the text rather than any background to the poem or on the author. However, New Criticism stresses greatly on close textual analysis, especially

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Thus it is safe to state that Practical Criticism and New Criticism go side by side, with New Criticism furthering the ideologies behind Practical Criticism. Richards and Empson can be seen as the founders, with T.S Eliot furthering the ideas in more detail. In a sense, they're both the same theory with how the texts are perceived, however New Criticism goes a step further with its underlying beliefs. New Critics place great emphasis on the fact that the meaning of a text is intrinsic. In essence however, New Criticism is Practical Criticism, just with more depth.

So, with this in mind, do you think you'll be engaging with texts in this regard? Or perhaps you already did and didn't know it! Let us know in the comments below.