Formalism: Method and Glossary

Why Formalism? Formalist literary criticism provides an analytical approach of close reading of literary texts along with a highly developed vocabulary used by nearly all readers and writers who want to discuss, interpret, appreciate, and evaluate literature. In America, when professors ask for a literary analysis, they mean a formalist analysis. In the twentieth century, formalism dominated the literary scene, and it continues to retain great influence in academic quarters. Formalism, as its name suggests (also known as Practical Criticism in England and New Criticism in America), focuses on the formal features found in literature and that readers must notice and name when describing and interpreting texts. Formalism has several aesthetic assumptions that pertain to imaginative, poetic works and that may also apply in some degree to non-fictional, rhetorical works:

- Literature’s purpose is primarily aesthetic: “art for art’s sake” (ars gratia artis).
- Literary works should be appreciated as self-contained works of art.
- Literature’s “content = its form” in an organic unity.
- Authorial intent is generally unavailable for textual analysis.
- Reader-response is relatively unimportant for textual analysis.
- Socio-historical context is less important than focusing on the text itself.

Critics now recognize the limitations of these cultural assumptions. However, formalist literary analysis is as valid and as necessary as ever, focusing on textual structures, techniques, and language. By this method, through “isolated” and “objective” analysis, formalist readers aim to classify and catalog works according to their “formal” attributes. They also seek to identify and discuss any “universal” truths that literary works might hold concerning what has been popularly called “the human condition.” Formalists consider these truths to be static, enduring, and applicable to all human cultures.

Leading formalists include T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, Northrop Frye, John Crowe Ransom, and Roman Jacobsen (who helped develop structuralism). These literary critics build on Aristotelian formalism in the Poetics, but they reject many earlier schools of criticism, such as Platonic and Romantic expressivism, mimetic criticism, rhetorical criticism, and philological and linguistic approaches; for they believe that literature should appeal mostly to the intellect, including the imagination, valuing richness of meaning, metaphor, and irony. Since the formalists set literary criticism on scientific grounds, their analytical or evidential project introduced the concept of “expert readers” into interpretation.

Formalism has left a lasting impression on literary scholarship. The formalist glossary and method of close reading continue as the foundation for literary education in America and much of the West, so much so that all other critical approaches to reading literature depend upon familiarity with formalism. Those who profess literature expect readers to use many aspects of formal analysis: to read closely, to “prove” interpretations from textual evidence, to notice and name formal features, and to articulate their findings using formalism’s vast vocabulary in the following seven categories.

Formalist Glossary

Character—creation and representation of fictional persons and entities

- antagonist: the main villain, adversary, opponent
- antithero: a central sympathetic character with significant personal flaws
- dynamic: changing, growing, learning, developing, active
- flat: not well-developed
- protagonist: the main character, often the hero, with whom the audience is expected to sympathize
- round: well-developed
- static: not growing or changing, an inactive personality
- symbolic: caricature that is representative of certain kinds of people, such as a Judas figure or Christ figure

Plot—a series of events or happenings that organize a text

- climax: the main event in a text
- complicated: characterized by many twists and turns
- conflict: plot features that demonstrate human rivalries and difficulties
- external: conflicts that are active, perhaps physical or overtly expressed
- internal: conflicts that are passive, perhaps mental or covertly expressed
- denouement: what happens as a result of the climax, the “fallout” or “payoff”
- foreshadowing: plot features that predict other events, like the climax or denouement
- implausible: fantastic plots that are not acceptable in the everyday sense of reality
- plausible: believable, everyday plots that imitate reality
- simple: arranged with few twists and turns
Theme—a major message or idea woven in the text
- controlling idea: the major motif or theme of a work
- related ideas: subthemes that contribute to the development of the main idea
- separate issues: ideas not directly related to the main theme or subthemes, but that are nevertheless important and contribute to the overall success of the text

Setting—atmosphere, historical period, physical setting, and mood of text
- place: physical or psychical locations of events, things, characters, and historical times
- time: physical or psychical progression of events
- ahistorical: not grounded in any real historical period; imaginary or fantasy
- chronological: linear telling of events
- backward: starting at the end and working toward the beginning
- forward: starting at the beginning and working toward the end
- circular: a reflection that begins anywhere, goes to the end, works its way to the beginning, and eventually gets back to where it started
- flashbacks: looking back into time
- historical: grounded in a “real” historical time period
- in media res: beginning more or less in the middle of events
- projections: looking forward into time
- fragmented: going back and forth in time with combinations of chronologies
- atmosphere: physical and external descriptions that help us better understand the setting
- mood: emotional and internal descriptions that help us better understand the setting

Point of view—perspective of the controlling narrative voice
- first person: narrative voice that speaks with “I/we/us” pronouns and perspective
- limited omniscience: narrator who doesn’t know everything
- objective: narrator who tries to tell story from an impersonal point of view
- omniscient: narrator who presumes to know the ultimate truth of the story
- reliable: narrator who can be trusted to tell the truth and be objective
- subjective: narrator who admits that personal factors have affected interpretation
- third person: narrative voice that uses “he/she/they” pronouns and perspective
- unreliable: narrator who cannot be trusted to tell the truth or be objective

Figures—various tropes and similes used to create emphasis, vivid depiction, and new perspectives
- allegory: extended metaphorical story with underlying moral or message
- analogy: extended simile or comparison of things or events with other things and events
- irony: paradoxical events, ideas, or attitudes that are played off against each other
- sarcasm: making serious fun of things, ideas, people, or events
- satire: synthesis of heavily developed ironies and sarcasms
- metaphor: comparison or identification of something with something else
- metonymy: symbolic substitution by association (as in “he gave up the sword” indicating leaving a life of warfare)
- personification: metaphor of becoming a person, comparing inanimate things to people
- simile: comparison of something or someone “as” or “like” something else
- symbolism: using inanimate or imagined things to stand for actual situations
- intangible: imaginary or “mental” symbols
- tangible: physical or “actual” symbols
- synecdoche: substitution of the whole for a part, or a part for the whole (“the smiling year” to indicate springtime)

Imagery—specific, sensory details used to describe characters, situations, things, ideas, or events
- hearing: images that make you hear sounds in your mind
- seeing: images that draw mental pictures
- smelling: images that bring the memories of odors and aromas to mind
- tasting: images that make you recall or imagine how something might taste
- touching: images that help you imagine how something might feel on your skin
- extrasensory: images that take you to an imaginary world of sensations