

define formalism in literature

define formalism in literature is essential to understanding a critical approach that focuses primarily on the form and structure of literary works rather than their content or historical context. This method examines elements such as language, style, narrative techniques, and literary devices to interpret texts. Formalism in literature prioritizes the text itself, encouraging readers and critics to analyze how the components of a work create meaning and aesthetic value. The approach emerged prominently in the early 20th century, influencing literary criticism and theory significantly. This article explores the definition of formalism in literature, its historical development, key principles, and its application in literary analysis. Additionally, it discusses major formalist theorists and critiques of the approach, providing a comprehensive overview for a deeper understanding of this essential literary theory.

- The Definition of Formalism in Literature
- Historical Background of Formalism
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- Major Formalist Theorists and Their Contributions
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The Definition of Formalism in Literature

Formalism in literature is a critical approach that emphasizes the form and structure of literary texts as the primary source of meaning. It advocates for close reading and detailed analysis of literary elements such as plot, character, symbolism, imagery, rhyme, meter, and narrative techniques. Rather than focusing on external factors like an author's biography, historical context, or social conditions, formalism concentrates on the text itself as an autonomous entity. This approach assumes that the intrinsic features of a literary work hold the key to its interpretation and aesthetic value. Defining formalism in literature involves recognizing its focus on how language and literary devices function within the text to produce meaning and emotional effects.

Historical Background of Formalism

The origins of formalism can be traced back to early 20th-century Russia with the emergence of Russian Formalism, a movement that revolutionized literary criticism by challenging traditional interpretive methods. Russian Formalists argued that literature should be studied as a unique form of language, distinct from everyday speech, and that the artistic features of a text deserve primary attention. This movement influenced Western literary theory and evolved into New Criticism in the United States, which shared similar principles focusing on the text's formal aspects. Over time, formalist ideas have permeated various branches of literary studies, establishing a foundation for modern textual analysis.

Russian Formalism

Russian Formalism was a pioneering movement that laid the groundwork for defining formalism in literature. Key figures such as Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Yuri Tynianov emphasized concepts like "defamiliarization" and the autonomy of literary language. They sought to identify the devices that make literature distinct from ordinary language and to analyze how these devices function within the text to create aesthetic experience.

New Criticism

New Criticism, which developed in the mid-20th century in the United States, adapted many Russian Formalist ideas. Critics like Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom focused on close reading, the unity of form and content, and the importance of paradox and ambiguity in literature. This school of thought reinforced the principle that meaning arises from the interplay of textual elements.

Key Principles of Formalism in Literary Analysis

Understanding how to define formalism in literature requires an exploration of its fundamental principles, which guide the analysis of literary texts. These principles prioritize the internal mechanics of a work, emphasizing the significance of form over external factors. The following key concepts underpin formalist criticism:

1. **Close Reading:** A meticulous examination of the text's language, structure, and literary devices.
2. **Autonomy of the Text:** Treating the literary work as a self-contained unit independent of authorial intention or historical background.
3. **Defamiliarization:** The technique of making the familiar seem strange to enhance perception of the text.
4. **Focus on Literary Devices:** Analysis of metaphor, symbolism, rhyme, meter, narrative methods, and other formal elements.
5. **Unity of Form and Content:** Understanding that meaning is generated through the interaction of form and content, not through content alone.

Major Formalist Theorists and Their Contributions

Several influential theorists have shaped the approach to defining formalism in literature through their pioneering ideas and analytical methods. Their contributions continue to inform contemporary literary criticism and theory.

Viktor Shklovsky

Viktor Shklovsky introduced the concept of “defamiliarization” (*ostranenie*), which describes how literary language disrupts ordinary perception, compelling readers to see familiar things in new ways. His work emphasized the artistic function of literature as a means to renew perception.

Roman Jakobson

Roman Jakobson contributed significantly to the linguistic and structural analysis of literature. He identified the poetic function of language, which focuses on the message for its own sake, and analyzed how sound patterns and syntax contribute to a text’s meaning.

Cleanth Brooks

Cleanth Brooks was a central figure in New Criticism, advocating for close reading and the discovery of paradoxes and ambiguities within texts. His approach underscored the inseparability of form and meaning, shaping the way formalism is understood in literary studies.

Applications of Formalism in Literature

Defining formalism in literature also involves recognizing how this approach is applied in literary analysis, teaching, and criticism. Formalism is a versatile tool used to dissect and appreciate various genres, styles, and periods of literature through detailed attention to textual features.

Literary Analysis and Criticism

Formalism guides critics in interpreting poetry, prose, and drama by focusing on structure, language, and literary devices. This method often reveals deeper levels of meaning and aesthetic complexity that might be overlooked when concentrating solely on content or context.

Educational Settings

In academic environments, formalism serves as a foundational approach for teaching students how to engage with texts critically. It develops skills in close reading and textual analysis, which are essential for advanced literary study.

Comparative Literature

By focusing on form, formalism allows for meaningful comparisons across different texts and traditions based on shared structural or stylistic features rather than external circumstances.

Criticisms and Limitations of Formalism

Despite its influential role, formalism in literature has faced various criticisms and identified limitations. Understanding these challenges is crucial to fully grasp the scope and boundaries of the formalist approach.

Neglect of Historical and Social Context

One major criticism is that formalism often ignores the historical, cultural, and political contexts that shape a literary work's creation and reception. Critics argue that this exclusion can result in an incomplete or skewed interpretation.

Authorial Intent and Reader Response

Formalism's focus on the text alone tends to discount the author's intentions and the reader's role in creating meaning. This has led to alternative theories like authorial criticism and reader-response theory gaining prominence.

Limitations in Addressing Certain Genres

Some literary forms, such as autobiographies or politically charged literature, may resist purely formalist analysis as their significance heavily depends on context and external factors.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is formalism in literature?

Formalism in literature is a critical approach that focuses on analyzing the form, structure, style, and literary devices of a text rather than its content or historical context.

Who are the key figures associated with formalism in literature?

Key figures include Russian formalists like Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Boris Eichenbaum, who pioneered formalist theory in the early 20th century.

How does formalism differ from other literary theories?

Formalism emphasizes the intrinsic features of the text itself, such as language, syntax, and narrative techniques, rather than author intent, historical background, or reader response.

What are the main principles of formalism in literature?

Main principles include focusing on the text's structure, using close reading to analyze literary devices,

and viewing literature as an autonomous art form.

Why is formalism important in literary analysis?

Formalism helps readers understand how literary effects are achieved through a text's form and technique, enhancing appreciation of its artistic craftsmanship.

Can formalism be applied to all literary genres?

Yes, formalism can be applied to poetry, prose, drama, and other genres by examining their specific formal elements and stylistic features.

What role does 'defamiliarization' play in formalism?

Defamiliarization, a concept introduced by Viktor Shklovsky, refers to presenting common things in an unfamiliar way to make the reader perceive them more vividly, a key technique studied in formalism.

How does formalism approach the study of literary devices?

Formalism analyzes how literary devices like metaphor, symbolism, rhyme, and narrative perspective function within the text to create meaning and aesthetic effect.

Is historical context considered in formalist literary criticism?

No, formalism deliberately excludes historical, biographical, or cultural contexts to focus solely on the text's formal elements and internal mechanics.

How has formalism influenced modern literary criticism?

Formalism laid the groundwork for subsequent critical approaches by emphasizing close reading and text-based analysis, influencing structuralism, New Criticism, and other methodologies.

Additional Resources

1. *Russian Formalism: History – Doctrine*

This book provides a comprehensive overview of Russian Formalism, one of the earliest and most influential schools of literary theory. It covers the historical context, key figures like Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson, and the fundamental concepts such as defamiliarization and literariness. The text is essential for understanding the formalist approach to analyzing literature by focusing on its form rather than content.

2. *Literary Theory: An Introduction* by Terry Eagleton

Eagleton's seminal work includes a detailed exploration of formalism within the broader scope of literary theory. The book explains how formalism emphasizes the text itself, analyzing narrative techniques, structure, and language without relying on external contexts such as author intent or historical background. It is an accessible introduction for students new to formalist criticism.

3. *Formalism and Marxism* by Terry Eagleton

This book examines the tension and dialogue between formalist literary criticism and Marxist theory. Eagleton explores how formalism's focus on literary form contrasts with Marxism's emphasis on social and economic contexts. The text is valuable for readers interested in how formalism fits into wider critical debates.

4. *Making Strange: A Poetics of the Literary Avant-Garde* by Paul K. Saint-Amour

Saint-Amour investigates the formalist concept of "defamiliarization" in relation to avant-garde literature. The book elaborates on how formalism's techniques challenge conventional perceptions by making the familiar seem strange. It offers a nuanced understanding of formalism's role in modern literary innovation.

5. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* by Jonathan Culler

While primarily about structuralism, this book also addresses formalism's foundational ideas and its influence on subsequent literary theories. Culler explains formalism's focus on the mechanics of texts and its methodological rigor. This work is helpful for contextualizing formalism within the evolution of 20th-century literary criticism.

6. *The Formalist Critics* edited by David Lodge

This anthology includes key essays by major formalist critics, providing direct insights into formalist theory and practice. The collected works highlight the movement's emphasis on close reading and textual analysis. It is an essential resource for understanding the primary texts that define formalism.

7. *On Literary History* by Roman Jakobson

Jakobson, a leading figure in Russian Formalism, explores the relationship between literary form and historical development. The book discusses how formalist methods can be applied to understand changes in literary style and language over time. Jakobson's work is foundational for grasping the formalist approach to literary evolution.

8. *Defamiliarization and the Poetics of Literary Form* by Victor Shklovsky (selected essays)

This collection of Shklovsky's essays elaborates on the concept of "ostranenie" or defamiliarization, a central idea in formalism. Shklovsky argues that art makes the ordinary appear strange to renew perception and attention. These essays are crucial for anyone studying the theoretical underpinnings of formalism.

9. *Close Reading: The Reader* by Jane Gallop

Gallop's book champions the formalist technique of close reading, focusing on the detailed analysis of a text's language and structure. It offers practical guidance and theoretical context for applying formalist methods in literary studies. This work bridges formalism with contemporary critical practice, emphasizing the importance of the text itself.

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