New Criticism (1930s to 1960s & later)

* 1920s-1930s and later. Greatly influential in academies
* It was a reaction against the critical practices of the time.
* The book *New Criticism* (1941) by John Crowe Ransom, American teacher and critic, is said to have inaugurated the movement.
* The name comes from the book. Many critics (American, British) together form this school.
* Major New Critics: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Pen Warren, William K Wimsatt, RP Blackmur, Munroe Beardsley, Austin Warren, Ivor Winters, Rene Wellek, Cleanth Brooks, William Empson, Murray Krieger.
* Some scholars include TS Eliot, IA Richards and FR Leavis also in the group because of their approaches like:
* Close reading of the text and explication
* Distrust of Romantic and Victorian aesthetics
* Belief in the autonomy of the text (beyond the intentions of the author).
* *Seven types of Ambiguity by* William Empson
* For New Critics the purpose of reading was “explication” of the meaning and the method was “close reading”.
* (Explication = explaining or making clear)
* Close reading should focus on the text in order to reveal the richness of language and through it the meaning.
* According to Empson the following are the major ambiguities a close reader should look for:

1. Metaphor
2. Multiple meanings (നാനാര്‍ത്ഥം)
3. Two apparently unconnected meanings
4. Combining of alternative meanings
5. Confusion in the idea
6. What is said is contradictory. (The reader is forced to invent interpretations.)
7. Full of Contradictions

* For the New Critics, explication of the poetic aspects, meanings etc is the purpose of close reading.
* In close reading they look for texture and structure.
* Texture includes aspects like paradox, irony, figures, ambiguity, tensions etc.
* According to Ransom texture is the quality of expression or the various elements which add beauty and meaning.
* Structure = Formal features like diction, syntax, rhyme, rhythm, meter etc.
* Allen Tate focused on “Tension in Poetry”, i.e., the tension between denotative and connotative meanings.

**Intentional Fallacy & Affective Fallacy**

* As a reaction against old historicism, biographical readings, Victorian moralizing (i.e., attributing to literature everything other than literariness)
* New Critics focused on the text and literariness.
* They attacked the influential argument of ‘expressive realism’, i.e., the Romantic fallacy that literature is the effluence of the noble soul.
* So naturally the New Critics repudiated “authorial intention”, author’s sincerity, authenticity etc. Instead they focused on unity, sublimity etc in the text.
* The work is not the author’s. It gets detached at birth.
* Meaning exists on the page, not in the author’s mind or in his/her intentions or the text’s effects.
* Thus they questioned the “intentional” and “affective” fallacies.

**Intentional Fallacy**

* It is the faulty practice of equating the meaning of a work with the author’s intentions. (Sometimes expressed in letters, diaries, interviews etc.)
* That is, text= author’s intentions
* New Critics were against this kind of reading.

**Affective Fallacy**

* According to New Critics, it is the faulty practice of reading and interpreting the text according to the psychological and emotional responses of the readers. That is, they believed that the text should not be confused with its effects/results.

Text = readers’ response

* New Critics discarded both.
* Their distrust of affective fallacy was a reaction against certain strands of impressionistic criticism which was not based on rigorous judgement.
* There were major similarities between the concerns of the New Critics and the formalists, especially in examining the relationships between a text’s form and its ideas. (In other words, the relationship between what a poem says and how the poem says it.)
* New Criticism, though very influential in the academies for decades, has been stridently questioned and opposed by most later theories for its ideological positions of dehistoricising, masking/hiding powerful political and economic interests etc.

**Contradictions (or devices) identified by New Critics**

* Irony
* Paradox
* Pun etc.

\*\*\*\*\* BJ’s classnotes; typed by Nirmal Paul; 28/03/2016 \*\*\*\*\*