

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In this Chapter ...

Stylistics is the school of literary criticism that is represented in this book, and this chapter discusses how it is related to other approaches to literary analysis. Nine schools of criticism are mentioned, and they are classified according to whether they put greater emphasis on the literary text itself or on the culture in which the text is read by the modern reader. Sample analyses of poems are given for three of the schools, including New Criticism, structuralism, and reader-response theory. The discussion shows that often literary analysis starts with a description of linguistics forms within a text and then makes an interpretation about how these forms affect the reader. Finally, two analytical tools of stylistic analysis that will be used throughout the book are considered: cohesion and foregrounding.

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1 Introduction

## 1.1 Literary Criticism


Which discipline has more theoretical approaches, linguistics or literature? Linguistics has at least: minimalism, lexical-functional grammar, categorial grammar, cognitive linguistics, connectionism, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, interaction analysis, and quantitative sociolinguistics. According to several popular introductions to literary criticism,<sup>1</sup> literature has at least: Russian Formalism, New Criticism, structuralism, stylistics, reader-response theory, Marxism, feminism, African-American criticism, and new historicism. So, it looks like a tie (though of course I cheated by choosing just nine approaches from each group – I could have listed many more). Stylistics is the approach taken in this book, but before we get to it, let us take a brief, and necessarily over-simplified, look at some of the ways that the study of literature has been practiced over the last century in order to get an idea of what literary critics do and to see how stylistics fits into this tradition. We will begin with the nineteenth-century background to some twentieth century approaches.

By the end of the nineteenth century religion was losing its power. Darwin had thrown the biblical story of Creation into doubt, and the new science of geology suggested that the earth was millions of years old, not the 6000 years confidently asserted by Bishop Usher, who had used biblical genealogy to calculate that the earth was created on October 15, 4004 BCE, in the afternoon. As the British poet and social critic Mathew Arnold wrote in “Dover Beach,”

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, . . .

The withdrawal of religion could cause a social crisis because Victorian England saw the value of religion not only as instilling moral values and uplifting the spirit, but also as pacifying the masses and preserving the social order. If religion retreated to irrelevance, what could accomplish these necessary social functions? Arnold believed that part of the answer was public education and, in particular, the study of literature, which could instill in the philistine working and middle classes “a greatness and a noble spirit” (quoted in Eagleton, 1983:24). So, one goal of teaching literature in Britain in the nineteenth century was to instill morality and good citizenship. In America, literature was also taught for these reasons. As Showalter (2003:22) notes, Yale's William Lyon Phelps considered that “teaching was

Table 1.1 *Classification of schools of literary criticism*

		
Text-oriented		Culture-oriented
Russian Formalism	structuralism	Marxism
New Criticism	stylistics	feminism
	reader-response*	African-American criticism
		new historicism

\* Reader-response criticism looks at both the text and the culture in which the text is read, but, unlike the other schools, it is mainly interested in how a reader processes and reacts to a text.

preaching,”<sup>2</sup> and the McGuffey Readers, which were used in the public schools and included excerpts from Hawthorne, Dickens, and Shakespeare, also aimed to instill good citizenship and patriotism.

One way of looking at the nine modern schools of literary criticism mentioned at the start of this chapter is whether they emphasize the analysis of literary texts or the cultural backgrounds of their readers. Of course, all of the theories paid at least some attention to the text, so the difference between these two emphases is not clear-cut, but rather lies along a continuum, as shown in Table 1.1.<sup>3</sup>

1.1.1 Culture-oriented Criticism

Because we are mainly concerned with the more text-oriented schools, we can take only the briefest look at the schools that have a primary interest in the reader’s culture. Let us start with one of the more recent, **new historicism**. The term implies that there is an old historicism, and indeed there is, though it is usually called “historical criticism.” This was the major approach to literary studies at the beginning of the twentieth century, and it is very much alive today. Historical critics study “the canon”, the great literature of the past, explaining the works of authors like Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton within the context of their times, and often relating them to the lives of their authors. For example, in order to understand *Paradise Lost* a historical critic might teach something about the life of John Milton, such as the fact that he was involved in the Puritan Revolution, and might even discuss why the Puritans rebelled against the Crown and how Puritan theology is reflected in Milton’s great poem. One goal of historical criticism is thus an ambitious one: to use literature as a window for looking into another time and another culture.

New historicism shares these goals, but while the primary aim of historical criticism is to understand literature, new historicism pays equal

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attention to understanding history. To this end, new historicism borrows not only from the discipline of history, but also from economics, geography, sociology, and other social sciences to study earlier societies. A common technique is to analyze a non-literary document, such as a political tract, and a literary document from the same period, with the goal of better understanding both the politics and the literature. In short, new historicism uses literary works as texts that can shed light on past cultures.

The other culture-based theories on the list are like historical criticism in that they aim to understand a society through its literature, but they are mainly concerned with understanding present-day society. This is not to say that these schools study only modern texts. On the contrary, they are interested in all earlier periods, but rather than focusing on the culture surrounding the text and its author, like historical criticism, they focus on the culture surrounding modern readers, in order to discover how the text is interpreted in and relevant to today's society. Of course, each of the schools has a particular point of view, as their names indicate, and one goal of these schools is to point out how readers from different cultural backgrounds and identity groups can view the same text differently. In contrast, the next two schools that we will discuss have little interest in the culture of the reader, but emphasize the literary text itself.

### 1.1.2 Text-oriented Criticism

Does one have to teach cultural theory in order to teach literature? Showalter (2003) recounts the case of a candidate for a job in a literature department who thought so. She said that her ideal course would be,

“Theory and – and, um – theory and *non*theory.”

“Nontheory, what’s that?”

“Well, nontheory, like, *you* know, poems, stories, plays” (p. 103).

The poems, stories, and plays are the main focus of the approaches in the left-hand column of Table 1.1.

#### 1.1.2.1 Russian Formalism

The school at the top of the list, **Russian Formalism**, was founded by one of the great linguists, Roman Jakobson, who, it was said, could speak half a dozen languages, all of them in Russian. The Russian Formalist school began around the turn of the twentieth century in Petrograd (St. Petersburg), but it was shut down when it lost favor with the Stalinist regime. Jakobson then moved to Prague, where he continued his work, collaborating with Czech colleagues in what came to be called the Prague School of

linguistics. Throughout his life, Jakobson considered the study of literature to be an integral part of linguistics.

The Russian Formalists looked at the language of literature and found it to be different from the language of everyday speech.<sup>4</sup> They pointed out that poetry in particular often uses syntactic patterns and diction that make it stand out and call attention to itself. The effect of this literary style is to foreground or recast familiar events and topics in an unfamiliar light, and thus heighten our awareness and understanding of them. Victor Shklovsky (1917/2004:20) expressed this idea in general terms: “Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*.” The cultural context from which a work of literature came, and indeed its very content, were of less interest to the Russian Formalists than its structure. The Russian Formalists and the Prague School studied language in all of its forms, and their scholarship shaped the beginning of the social science method of *structuralism*, the tradition from which Chomskian generative grammar, which we will look at in Chapter 4, is a direct descendent. We will take a look at the structuralists’ approach to literature after discussing a critical school that is often considered a first cousin to Russian Formalism, New Criticism.

### 1.1.2.2 New Criticism

**New Criticism** grew up in Britain and the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. It broke with the tradition of historical criticism by focusing on the literary work itself, without attention to the biography of the author or the social circumstances in which the work was written. The twentieth century witnessed the rise of science within the universities, and both the Russian Formalists and the New Critics tried to bring quasi-scientific methods to the study of literature. However, New Criticism focused not only on the poetic devices in a work, but also on the content. In fact, a central principle of New Criticism was that the structure and content of a good poem (and by extension of all good literature) worked together to create the poem’s true meaning. “Beauty is truth – truth beauty,” wrote Keats, and the New Critics looked for poetic or imaginative truth in literature as scientists looked for literal truth in nature. New Critics believed that the aesthetic experience provided by literature allowed access to a truth higher than literal truth, as it provided insights into human nature and universal human experience that evoked recognition, understanding, and even catharsis in the educated reader. The New Criticism emphasized the practice of close reading, where a passage is looked at in great detail and features such as images, sounds, and symbols are analyzed and related to each other.

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A useful exercise for practicing New Criticism is to paraphrase a poem and then ask how the poem does its job of conveying truth more effectively than the paraphrase. For example, consider the following poem.

**The Lake Isle of Innisfree**

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;  
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,  
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

William Butler Yeats

Yeats's poem not only expresses the desire to escape to a tranquil and soul-restoring retreat, it partially creates this experience. The rhythm is unhurried and a bit irregular, like a walk in a garden; the vowel sounds for the most part are soothing and low, and the repeated *l* sounds in line four allow us to hear the humming of the bees in the glade. These are some of the reasons that the poem has been enormously popular since its publication in 1888.

Now consider this paraphrase.

I will get up now and go to Innisfree and build a small cabin of clay and wattles. I will have nine bean rows and a bee hive and live there alone.

I shall have some peace there, for peace comes slowly from morning until night. There, midnight is full of stars; the light of noon is not harsh; and in the evening you can see the linnets flying.

I will get up and go now for I always hear the sound of the waves in the lake reaching the shore, while I stand on the road or on the grey pavements. I hear the lake sounds deep in my heart.

The poem is obviously more effective than the paraphrase at conveying the idea that the heart yearns for the peace that only nature can provide. The New Critic, then, would ask what poetic devices the speaker uses to accomplish this task. One device is the use of sound imagery, where a word or individual sound suggests a natural sound that is not actually

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heard. An example is **onomatopoeia**, where a word resembles the sound it denotes, like *whispering*, *clang* and *sizzle*. An example from the poem is the word *lapping*. Notice that the paraphrase merely tells us that the speaker hears the sound of the waves against the shore whereas in the poem the word *lapping* lets us hear this sound. Similarly, the word *cricket* lets us hear the sound that the cricket makes.

A second device of sound imagery is the **phonetic intensive** defined by Arp (1997) as, “words whose sound. . . , by an obscure process, to some degree suggest [their] meaning” (p. 390). Unlike onomatopoeic words, the meanings of phonetic intensives need not refer to sounds. For example, the sound *sl* suggests the feeling of slipperiness, as in “slick,” “slime,” and “sludge.” Phonetic intensives in Yeats’s poem include the words *glimmer* and *glow*, in which the *gl* sound suggests light, specifically the light that the speaker sees from the stars at midnight and from the sun at noon. Other examples of *gl* sound imagery include the words *glisten*, *glitter*, and *gleam*.

Let us now take a look at the vowel sounds in the poem. As we will discuss in Chapter 2, some English vowels are actually diphthongs, which include the sound of *y* after the pure vowel as in *mate* (MEYT), *fate* (FEYT), and *create* (KRIYEYT). The *y* sound adds a harsh quality to the pure vowel, and choir directors will tell their singers to get through the *y* quickly, or not to pronounce it at all, so that, for example, the line

You’re the mate that fate had me created for . . .

sounds more like

You’re the MEHT that FEHT had me KRIHETID for . . .

Vowels other than diphthongs are softer and more soothing, especially the rounded vowels produced at the back of the mouth, such as *UW* (as in *mood*) and *OW* (as in *low*). “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” contains a good number of *OW* sounds in strategic places in the poem. For example, the second stanza, where the tranquility and calm of the island is most clearly evoked, contains two *OW* end rhymes (*slow* and *glow*), and these are reinforced by the additional rounded vowels in *morning* and *noon*. In the last stanza the harsh mood of the city contrasts with the mood of the lake, and *y* sounds are prominent. For example, in the next-to-last line, the city is characterized by the words *roadway*, *pavement* and *grey*, which, besides suggesting something dreary, all contain the *EY* sound, with the last *EY* emphasized because the adjective *grey* is unexpectedly placed after rather than before the noun it modifies. In the last line of the poem, however, we return to the lake and to the softer sound of *OW*, this time heard not just by the ear but by the heart.

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Like vowels, consonants can strike us as more or less harsh. The softer consonants, like *l* and *r*, are produced with the mouth more open than it is for the harsher consonants, like *t* and *s* (thus *l* and *r* are more like vowels). In the poem, softer consonants appear frequently in the lines that describe the isle. For example, the quietness of the lake is suggested by the repeated *l* and *r* sounds in this line:

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore.

This use of repeated consonant sounds is, of course, **alliteration**. We will examine this and the other poetic devices just discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

While the New Critics would engage in the kind of close examination of sound imagery that I have just attempted, they would probably refrain from emphasizing the circumstances in which the poem was written, such as the fact that Yeats's father gave him a copy of Thoreau's book *Walden*, and that the young Yeats had expressed a desire to live as Thoreau had, alone in a small cabin by a lake, because these autobiographical facts are not part of the poem itself.

### 1.1.2.3 Structuralism

The next critical school on the list is **structuralism**, which was based on the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, the French-speaking Swiss linguist whose book *Course in General Linguistics* is a founding document of modern linguistic science. Saussure pointed out that in language sounds usually have an arbitrary relation to what they signify (except for onomatopoeia, which is rare). For example, the sounds in the word *red* (*r*, EH, and *d*) refer to the vivid color because English speakers agree on this relationship, not because anything in the sounds themselves suggests that hue (the Amharic word for “red” is KAHYI and the Malaysian word is MEERAH). In other words, languages match sounds to concepts in an arbitrary way that is determined by the people who speak the language. Saussure also emphasized that language is a self-contained system, “où tout se tient,” where everything holds together. This idea can be seen in the system of phonemes or basic sounds in a language, which we will study in Chapter 2. The phoneme IY (the vowel in *eat*) is not defined by any inherent quality in the sound itself, but rather by its place in phonemic space, that is, its relationship to the other vowels. If the tongue dips too low in the mouth during its production, IY becomes EY, and the word *eat* becomes *ate*. In a similar way, the structuralists said, the meaning of a word depends on its contrast to the meanings of other words. For example, “cup” occupies a place in semantic space somewhere between “mug” and “bowl,” and a



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particular vessel without a handle and with a wide base might be called either a cup or a bowl depending on what it is used for.

Structuralists also held that the system of semantic contrasts in a language affects speakers' concepts and how they think about the world. In English, a woman with medium-brown hair is called a "brunette" and is associated with the cultural stereotypes of that concept (less glamorous and maybe a bit smarter than a blonde). In Peninsular Spanish, however, that same woman is *una rubia* (roughly, a blonde), and is associated with the cultural connotations of that concept (a bit exotic and northern-European-looking). So, to understand even seemingly objective notions like cups and hair color, we need to look at the linguistic and cultural systems in which they are embedded.

The structuralists analyzed the details of literary texts, but with an eye to relating the texts to the cultural systems and traditions in which they occurred, and that is why Table 1.1 places structuralism in the middle of the textual/cultural continuum. Structuralists might observe, for example, that the metrical pattern of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is very flexible. The basic meter is iambic, where a stressed syllable follows an unstressed syllable, dah DUH/ duh DUH/ duh DUH, but this pattern is often violated in the poem. For example, the second half of line two is perfectly iambic, but the first half of the line contains only one iambic foot, as can be seen in this transcription:

And a | small CAB | in BUILD there | of CLAY | and WAT | tles MADE |

A structuralist might make note of this pattern in the poem and then go on to compare it to the general patterns of lyric poetry of the period, noting that this degree of metrical flexibility was not typical of the poetry of England at the time, and that Yeats was trying to establish a new genre of Irish poetry.

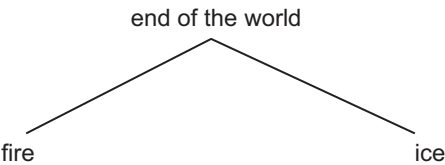
The structuralists also analyzed literary texts to uncover patterns of organization and contrast that might reflect similar patterns within the society in which the poem is embedded. I will attempt to do this with Robert Frost's poem, "Fire and Ice."

### Fire and Ice

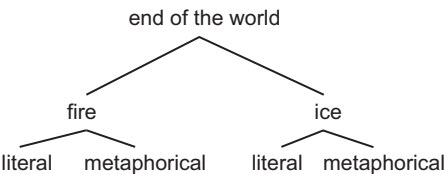
Some say the world will end in fire,  
 Some say in ice.  
 From what I've tasted of desire  
 I hold with those who favor fire.  
 But if I had to perish twice,  
 I think I know enough of hate  
 To say that for destruction ice  
 Is also great  
 And would suffice.

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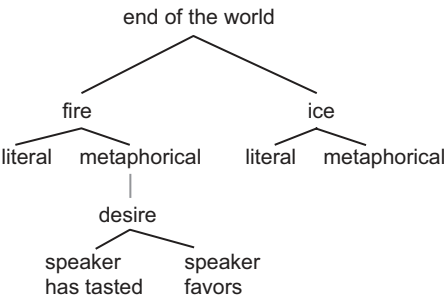
The first two lines of the poem provide a neat binary division, which can be illustrated using a **tree diagram**:



The third line makes the point that the speaker does not just mean fire (and by implication ice) literally, but also metaphorically. So, now the poem has two levels of meaning: literal and metaphorical. This can be added to the tree diagram as follows.



The third and fourth lines elaborate on destruction by fire. In the third line, the speaker says that he has personally experienced desire, and in the fourth line he says that he favors the fire theory. The diagram of the poem can therefore be expanded to include this information, as follows.



The fifth (and middle) line of the poem serves as a transition between the two theories of destruction. The last four lines discuss the possibility of the world ending by ice. Line 6 provides the expected metaphorical interpretation of ice, namely hate. So far, the logic of the poem has been symmetrical, as seen in the tree diagram, and if this is to continue, we should expect two propositions about the possibility of destruction by hate: the first should mention the speaker’s experience with hate, and the second should mention its destructive potential. These expectations are met. Line 6 tells us that the speaker knows hate, and lines 7, 8, and 9 tell us that its destructive potential is great enough to end the world. Thus,