

The background of the entire page is a reproduction of Raphael's fresco 'The School of Athens'. It depicts a group of ancient Greek philosophers in a grand architectural setting. In the center, Plato (an older man with a white beard, wearing a red robe) points his right index finger towards the sky, while Aristotle (a younger man with a brown beard, wearing a blue robe) holds his right hand palm-down towards the earth. They are surrounded by other philosophers in various poses, some standing and some sitting. The architecture features high arches, columns, and a coffered ceiling. The title text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

Literary Theory & Criticism: Questions and Answers

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Literary Theory & Criticism

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Write an essay to define “literary theory” and “literary criticism” and show the differences between them. Provide examples to illustrate your point.

Literary theory is a collection of ideas that provide support to our comprehension and interpretation of a text. Each literary theory has its own methods by which we create meaning and appreciation of a literary text.

Literary theory refers to the methods or approaches used to examine and analyze literary texts. It means from which point of view you examine a work — from a psychological point of view, from a moral point of view, from a historical point of view, from a political point of view, etc. Structuralism, Deconstruction, Formalism, Gender approaches, historicism are all theories.

Given that a reader's theory is subject to be complete or incomplete, eclectic or depending on a single one, an incomplete, and hence, unclear literary theory more usually leads to absurd, weak, or random interpretations. Whereas an outlined, logical, and lucid theory equips readers with a developed method by which they produce premises that allow them to explain, organize, and refine their judgments of a text consistently.

A better understanding of literary theory can be obtained by reviewing the etymology of the term theory. The term is derived from the Greek word 'theoria', meaning a "view or perspective of the Greek stage." So, literary theory, grants us a view of life, a perception of why we interpret texts the way we do. Think of the several seats in the theater that the audience might sit. Depending on the seat—whether nearby the stage, or far back, or to the left, or the right, or in the middle row—the view and the interpretation of the events will be changed. Literary theory questions us where we are sitting while reading a text.

Another way to make clear the difference between these two concepts, let us draw an analogy on weight loss. There are several theories on how to lose weight. One theory says you should work out (exercise). Another theory states that you can go on diet. Another theory encourages you to take weight loss pills. Another theory says that yoga can make you lose weight. These are all theories on how to lose weight. They are merely ideas. To put them to practice, you should try them out. Person A may apply the exercise

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theory. Person B may go on diet. Person C could take weight loss pills. Person D will try yoga.

Moreover, you can apply more than one theory to the same individual. You can also apply the same theory to several individuals. The same holds true of literary theory and criticism. You can apply a theory to one text or several texts. You can also apply several theories to the same text.

Literary criticism, on the other hand, is the application of these theories to literary texts. A theory remains an idea in your head until you apply it. Mathew Arnold, describes literary criticism as “A disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.” Implicit in this definition is that literary criticism is a disciplined activity that attempts to describe, study, analyze, justify, interpret, and evaluate a work of art using a certain theory.

Literary theory formulates the principles and tenets of the nature and value of literature. By citing general aesthetic and moral principles of literature, theory provides the necessary framework for criticism. Literary criticism applies the principles of theories to a particular work. Using theories, critics define the standards of taste and explain, evaluate, or justify a particular piece of literature. The basis for literary criticism is literary theory. Without literary theory, literary criticism could not exist.

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What is a “theory” and what is a “literary theory”? What are the methods of literary theory building? What are the characteristics of an ideal literary theorist? Write an essay to answer these questions.

Theory is a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained. Literary theory is a collection of ideas that provide support to our comprehension and interpretation of a text. Each literary theory has its own methods by which we create meaning and appreciation of a literary text.

Because no literary theory can account for all the various factors included in everyone’s conceptual framework, and because we as readers all have different literary experiences, there can exist no metatheory—no single overarching literary theory that encompasses all possible interpretations of a text suggested by its readers. And there can be no single correct literary theory, for in and of itself, each literary theory asks valid questions of and about a text, and no one theory is capable of exhausting all legitimate questions to be asked about any text. An ideal literary theorist should be well versed in literature, literary theory, criticism, in a field of knowledge that is non-literary, and in the discipline to be applied.

The Direct Theory Building is the first and most common way to create a literary theory by borrowing a set of principles from a non-literary field of knowledge such as psychology or economics and render them to be applicable to literary texts. *The Eclectic Theory Building* is another way to build a literary theory by blending principles taken from two or more fields, including other literary theories, and form a separate literary theory. The third way to create a theory is called *Creation via Shift of Focus* whereby we can create a theory by shifting the focus of an existing theory; for example, the Reception Theory shifted the focus of the Reader-Response Theory. *Creation via Addition* is another way by which we can create a theory by adding a significant concept to an existing theory, for instance, Carl Jung added the concept of the collective to the already existing Freudian concept of the unconscious. In addition, there is the so-called *Creation via Modification* in which we can create a literary theory by modifying an existing one, for example, Neofeminism, after Feminism became tradition, it was modified in the 21st century and came to be called “Neofeminism”, which celebrates the “feminine phase” and the submissive role of women.

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Furthermore, *Creation via Concept Application* by which we can take a single concept and apply it to literature.

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What is meant by an “eclectic approach” in literary theory? Write an essay to explain the meaning of eclectic approach and support your answer with examples.

In literary theory, an eclectic approach means selecting principles and ideas from more than one theory and then apply them on the same text.

For example, there is a theory that focuses on the behaviors and meanings that are suggested but not overtly stated (the psychological theory), and there is a theory that focuses on the economy to reveal how those in control of the means of production manipulate the rest and thereby change the system (the marxist theory), and then there is a theory that focuses on how to identify and analyze the literatures of racial and ethnic minorities in order to discover their unique characteristics and worldviews (the multiculturalist theory). Thus, a critic who uses an eclectic approach blends ideas from two or all of the aforementioned theories and apply them on the same literary text.

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Write an essay to describe the classical literary theories. Support your answer with examples.

The so-called “classical” period, starting around 500 BC, witnessed the great foundations of Western philosophy laid by Plato and Aristotle.

Plato is considered the father of theory. He represents pure logic. In his book, the Republic, which is a book he wrote to educate rulers, he talks about poets and poetry. He says that poetry is bad, and that poets must be banished from the society. According to him, poets are criminals, dangerous to themselves and the society, because poetry is connected with feelings, and kings should not be influenced by that. He asserts that emotions cloud your reasoning. Rulers should be guided by mind, not heart.

Plato views poetry as a powerful force in molding public opinion, and sees it as a danger to his ideal city, ordered as this is in a strict hierarchy whereby the guardians (philosophers) and their helpers (soldiers) comprise an elect minority which rules over a large majority of farmers, craftsmen, and “money-makers”.

Plato’s indictment against poetry has been based on its arousing of negative feelings (its appeal to the lower aspects of the soul such as emotion), its impracticality in life, and its expression of falsehood (mere mimesis).

According to Plato, life itself is an imitation of another world. There is a world which is perfect, but not the one we live in. It is a world of ideal forms, a utopian world. Our life is a mirror to that world. For example, a carpenter has an idea of making a chair. When he makes it, it looks different to the one he imagined to make, because it is an imitation. Every imitation is not perfect. Those ideas or imaginations come from the other world, the utopian one. The Gods send them, and hence his disapproval of poetry. If a poet wants to write about a chair, his writing would be a copy of a copy. Poetry is like double mimesis. It is twice removed from the reality.

Now, how can Plato be a literary theorist while he hates poetry? Well, he allowed the religious type. Plato has the moral theory. When we have a poem, play, short story or novel, we have to apply the moral theory by trying to find the moral lesson in the text. Since it is a didactic theory, a literary work should edify and educate morally.

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In contrast with Plato, **Aristotle** sees poetry as having a positive function in the political state, which exists not merely for utilitarian purposes but to promote what Aristotle calls the “good life,” or the achievement of virtue and practical wisdom.

Aristotle’s theory is called the cathartic theory. Aristotle borrowed his idea from medicine. Catharsis means purgation. He says that a poem is like a wet pad. When you have a temperature, the wet pad takes your heat off. A poem or any other literary form works like that. When you watch a horror movie, you will get rid of your fears. When you see a tragedy, and the tragic hero dies, you will be thankful that it was not you who died.

We experience the catharsis by observing the actions of the events, we purify our negative feelings. Those negative feelings are pity and fear. Pity and fear are the most significant feelings that we should get rid of, because a good king should not show these two feelings. The dual would lead kings to bad decisions. These decisions influence the future of the country.

Horace was a Roman poet who wrote *Ars Poetica* (“The Art of Poetry”), a 476-line poem in which he advises young poets on the art of writing poetry and drama. He introduced the concept of decorum, i.e., the stability of form and content. Form refers to structure and style. Style refers to the use of language, which includes diction, figures of speech and sentence structure. For example, we have to use the form of elegy when writing a poem about death, we have to use the form of tragedy when writing a play about a tragic hero, and using comedy when writing happy plays. Shakespeare violated the principle of decorum by inserting comic reliefs in his tragedies to break monotony and to cater for different tastes of the audience. According to Horace, the best example of the use of decorum is found in the works of Homer. The Horatian dulce-utile platitude is that poetry should instruct (utile) and delight (dulce). “Delight” does not mean comic or inducing laughter. It means you enjoy the work. You might enjoy a work that is comic or tragic. Horace states that the advantage of teaching through delight is twofold: it conveys the writer’s message more quickly, it retains the message in the audience’s mind for a longer period of time. The Horatian teach-and-instruct principle has been carried out on non-literary disciplines as well, such as gamification in education, that is, using games to educate people.

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Longinus was a Roman rhetorician and philosophical critic. He wrote *On the Sublime* during the first century AD, a Roman-era Greek treatise on aesthetics and literary criticism. The concept of the sublime (hypsos, which originally meant “aloft” in Latin). Good poetry, according to Longinus, should transport you to a higher level. How do we feel the sublime? Goosebumps: temporary pimples on the skin brought on by cold or fear or by sudden excitement, and caused by the contraction of connective tissues papillae at the base of hairs. The sublime is an elevated emotion and feeling of awe you experience when you read a great work of art. The sublime is grandeur in simplicity. Great works do not cause an experience of the sublime from cover to cover.

The sublime is not pathos (the feeling of pity), bathos (sentimentality and melodrama), pompous (elevated language), bombast (impressive language), literati (highly educational and refined language), nor rhetoric (which attempts to persuade). It is the echo of a great soul, i.e., the experience of a climatic moment of awe, emotions and spirituality at the same time. The sublime has five sources: the innate ability to conceive great thoughts, the innate ability to feel great passions, diction, syntax, and figures of speech. The first two sources are gifts whereas the rest are skills. If we have these sources of the sublime, we become “genius”

As a good example of the sublime, Longinus refers to Sappho’s poem “Ode to Jealousy” and describes it as a “sublime ode” Sappho’s ode serves as an ironic finale to our sessions on classical literary theories, since it is the poem Longinus picks as an ideal example of his theory of the sublime, while it is a love poem that Plato would have condemned as a celebration of negative and misleading emotions.

The four classical theorists we have covered agrees on the what (matter) and disagreed on the how (manner); in other words, they all agreed that the purpose of poetry is to teach, but they differed as to how this goal would be achieved.

Plato took a direct approach and said that a poet should teach in an explicit manner. **Aristotle** stated that poetry can produce a moral being by cleansing and purifying that being of all negative emotions. **Horace** said that poetry can have a faster and more lasting effect on an individual if it is

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done through delight. **Longinus** said that poetry can have a stronger effect on an individual if it touches their soul through the sublime

While Plato displayed a negative attitude towards poets, Aristotle, Horace and Longinus hailed poets and dramatists. Longinus differed from his predecessors by shifting the focus from logic and rules in writing poetry to pure emotions. We move from Plato's distrust of emotions to Longinus' praise of emotions.

These four giants laid the foundation of literary theory and criticism. They had their say about the basic aspects of a literary text: form, style, purpose, theme, characters, plot, setting, etc. What later critics and theorists did was explore these aspects further and expand on these classical notions.

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What does Aristotle mean by “catharsis” and how can poets produce cathartic effects in their works? Write an essay to answer this question.

Catharsis, the purification or purgation of the emotions (especially pity and fear) primarily through art. In criticism, catharsis is a metaphor used by Aristotle in the *Poetics* to describe the effects of true tragedy on the spectator. The use is derived from the medical term *katharsis*, meaning “purgation” or “purification”. Aristotle states that the purpose of tragedy is to arouse “fear and pity” and thereby effect the catharsis of these emotions.

Aristotle believed that an audience’s ability to feel the same emotions as those displayed by actors onstage is an integral part of the experience of watching theater, and that through this experience audiences can learn to better regulate their emotions in real life.

An audience is far more likely to have a cathartic experience if they form a strong attachment to—or identification with—the characters, whether in a play or book. Aristotle’s definition of catharsis was specific to the experience that audiences have watching theater, or to people reading literature. According to that definition, only audience members and readers can experience catharsis—and not the actors or characters themselves. However, it’s sometimes the case that literary characters do have cathartic experiences. For example, in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay reads a tragic book by Sir Walter Scott, and the emotional impact it has on him leads him to feel a greater sense of clarity about his own life and his relationships with other characters in the book.

A cathartic experience—whether in theater or literature—is an experience in which the audience or reader experiences the same emotions that the characters are experiencing on stage or on the page. A cathartic work is any work of literature that gives readers this experience. Imagine, for example, a book about a young boy who loses his mother to cancer. Such a book might not be cathartic for everyone, but for someone who has lost a friend or family member to cancer, reading such a book may be an extremely emotional experience, in the sense that such a reader may find themselves feeling the character’s grief or anger as though it were their own. This example serves to highlight an important part of what makes a work of literature cathartic: the reader must have developed a strong identification with the characters. In other words, if readers are unable to

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“see themselves” in the characters—if they feel they do not have any qualities or experiences in common—then they probably will not achieve the level of emotional investment necessary to have a cathartic experience in response to the work. Because of this, it generally takes a great deal of skill and experience on the part of the author to produce a truly cathartic piece of literature.

The effect of fear and pity may be created by spectacle; but it may also be created by the very structure of the events, and this method has priority and is the way of a better poet. For the plot should be so constructed that even without seeing the play, anyone who merely hears the events unfold will shudder and feel pity as a result of what is happening—which is precisely what one would experience in listening to the plot of Oedipus.

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Write an essay to compare Plato's theory of poetry with that of Aristotle.

According to Plato, poets should be banned from the society and poetry is bad. According to him, poetry should give you or teach you a moral lesson, and if it does not do that, then there is no need for poetry. He allowed only one kind of poetry in the society and that is religious poetry, because it teaches moral lessons. Other kinds of poetry which do not teach moral lessons must not be allowed. Whenever we read poetry and we are applying Plato's theory, we should search for a moral lesson and if we could not find a moral lesson, then the work is bad.

In contrast with Plato, Aristotle sees poetry as having a positive function in the political state, which exists not merely for utilitarian purposes but to promote what Aristotle calls the "good life," or the achievement of virtue and practical wisdom.

He agreed with Plato partially. He agreed that poetry is an imitation but he did not agree that poetry is bad and he gave reasons for that. He said every person has negative feelings inside him and we have to get rid of them by feeling them. These negative feelings should not stay in our heart. Something should take it out and that thing is poetry. Poetry is like a device to take feelings out; for example, when we read poetry, it makes us feel bad or sometimes, sad, and by feeling them, we get rid of them and this theory is called the catharsis theory, which means purification.

There are many negative feelings, but there are two significant feelings which should be purified and these two feelings are pity and fear, because both of them either they lead to wrong action or inaction. Feel pity or sorry for someone but do not let it control your mind. You should let logic control you, not pity. Do not let pity drive you into the wrong decision, even fear too. When you want to make a decision and it is a wise decision, but you are afraid of something, then this fear will stop you from taking a step forward. Let logic lead your life, not pity and fear.

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Write an essay to apply the moral and cathartic theories to Sophocles' King Oedipus.

Oedipus was a mythical Greek king of Thebes. A tragic hero in Greek mythology, Oedipus accidentally fulfilled a prophecy that he would end up killing his father and marrying his mother, thereby bringing disaster to his city and family.

The moral lesson of Oedipus Rex is that pride goes before the fall. Oedipus has immense pride, so much pride that he believes he can outsmart the gods who prophesied, via the oracle of Delphi, that he would kill his father and marry his mother. When the oracle gave him this prophecy, he decided that he would simply not return home to Corinth, and he would avoid his parents, yet during his escape, he encountered an old man who blocked his way. Oedipus killed that old man. As he reached Thebes, he married an old woman, this old man and woman turned out to be his real parents.

The moral lessons are as follows: you cannot escape or change your destiny (you should accept your fate, instead of challenging it), killing an old man who blocked his way (he ought to be cautious of killing someone old enough to be his father), marrying an old woman who, also, old enough to be his mother. All in all, Oedipus should have stayed put and kept praying that the gods alter his destiny. If he did so, he would have never killed his real parents.

With catharsis as a term used by Aristotle to describe emotional release of the feelings of pity and fear experienced by the audience at the end of a successful tragedy, the readers/audience experience this catharsis at the point in which Oedipus realizes his role in the plight of the people of Thebes. At the time of his realization, Oedipus feels great remorse and shame for what he has done; therefore, he blinds and exiles himself for his actions, his mother/wife commits a suicide, and hence, catharsis is achieved.

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What does Horace mean by “decorum” and what is his utile-dulce platitude? Write an essay to answer this question.

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What does Longinus mean by the “sublime” and what work does he describe as a great example of the sublime? Write an essay to answer this question.

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Write an essay to show how Plato, Aristotle, Horace and Longinus agree and disagree with one another on the nature and function of poetry.

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Write an essay to discuss the main principles of the Psychoanalytical Theory of literature.

Probably the most significant aspect of Freudian theory is the primacy of the unconscious. Hidden from the conscious mind, which Freud compared to that small portion of an iceberg that is visible above the surface of the water, the unconscious is like the powerful unseen mass below it. Because the conscious mind is not aware of its submerged counterpart, it may mistake the real causes of behavior. An individual may be unable to tell the difference between what is happening and what she thinks is happening. In short, our actions are the result of forces we do not recognize and therefore cannot control.

In an effort to describe the conscious and unconscious mind, Freud divided the human psyche into three parts: the id, the superego, and the ego. They are, for the most part, unconscious. The id, for example, is completely unconscious; only small parts of the ego and the superego are conscious.

The id (Latin for “it”) is made up of all these instincts we referred to and it always seeks satisfaction no matter what. It operates in accordance to the “pleasure principle.” Think of it as the selfish devil within us. It’s like a prison full of criminals. It is the part of the mind in which innate instinctive impulses and primary processes are manifest. The problem is that you cannot satisfy the id all the time; for example, if you are in the class and very hungry, the id wants to be pleased by eating, but you cannot. It is not a proper place or a suitable situation.

The superego is the part of a person’s mind that acts as a self-critical conscience, reflecting social standards learned from parents and teachers. It is the angel inside us. It always tries to show that we are above these id instincts. It has its own demands like spiritual aspirations, generosity, kindness, public image, selflessness, morality, religion, etiquette, sacrifice, and it gives you feelings of guilt when the id is allowed too much space.

The ego (Latin for “I”) functions according to the “reality principle.” It is the regulator that tries to strike the balance between the id and the superego. Think of it as the traffic police officer who manages traffic. For example, the ego stops the id telling it that you cannot eat a sandwich in a

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class because there is a lecture. The ego collaborates with both, the id and the superego.

Now, if you leave things up to your id, you will become a monster, a person without a conscience ready to do anything to satisfy your instincts. If you leave things up to your superego, you will turn into a person out of this world, a dreamer, an idealist. In some people, the id is overactive, and this gives us people like Jack the Ripper, Al Capone and Pablo Escobar. In some people, the superego is very active, and this gives us people like Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa.

What makes the id or the superego overactive is the malfunction of the ego. When the ego fails to regulate and gives priority to the id or the ego, that is a case of mental disturbance and the individual facing this problem would need a kind of therapy. Note that any lack of balance between the two results in mental disturbance, even when the superego is overactive. When there is too much pressure, the ego cannot regulate anymore and it will lean to the id as a defense mechanism—critical threshold.

People who have a problem with the ego and the id, mental disease. Their ego is not functioning well. If the ego works well to balance between the id and the superego, the outcome will be a healthy individual or a healthy personality.

There are two kinds of drive, the emotional and the physical. These drives search for satisfaction and if they are satisfied, they are ok and if they are not, the result is frustration. If a drive was frustrated, it will lead us to discomfort. It is okay temporarily like the child who wants to go to bathroom, but when the situation is repeated, it will be neurosis. Blocking the drive will lead to neurosis.

Analyzing dreams is very important to know the unconscious. When you repress your thinking, it is not healthy, because it will come out in dreams. Dreams are the repressed drives outlet, they will not come out directly in dream because it will be a nightmare so they will come out disguised as images or symbols in dreams. If they come out disguised, they will not disturb you.

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Freud also focuses on childhood. He states that childhood experiences shapes and determines adulthood. Everything we do today is the result of what happened in our childhood, which programs our adulthood personalities. Therefore, when we want to create great men, we take care of their childhood; for example, Walt Disney spends billions of dollars on making animation movies and cartoons to shape children's personalities.

When we apply this theory to literature, we analyze characters in terms of psychoanalysis, what are the drives the characters are displaying? What are the characters' motives that compel them to take action? Do the characters have ego issues? What psychological problems are the characters suffering from? How do the characters' childhood experiences shape their adult personalities? What do the images, symbols and dreams in the text indicate?

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Write an essay to discuss the main principles of the Formalist theory of literature.

Formalism is the most influential literary theory in the twentieth century. The reason for this popularity is that it only requires to analyze the text. You don't have to refer to anything outside the text. For example, the moral theory of literature requires an acquaintance with ethics, the codes of morality and religious principles, whose details may vary from one place to another. Formalism believes that a text has its own laws and principles. The name of the approach shows that the critic should emphasize form over content.

In his book *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, first published in 1954, M. H. Abrams classifies critical theories into two types: the type that reflects like a mirror, and the type that expresses, like a lamp.

A mirror does not have a light source of its own. It only reflects light from an external source. In other words, a writer reflects in his work the ideas he has come to acquire from the outside world. For example, according to the didactic theory propounded by Plato (and not objected to by Aristotle, Horace and Longinus), a text should teach a moral lesson, but where did the author get this moral lesson from? The writer obtained this moral lesson from a source such as religion (the Bible, for instance) or ethics.

A lamp does not reflect light. It is in itself a source of light. In other words, the author expresses his own ideas in his text. He does not reflect other people's ideas. The source of the ideas in a text are internal, within the writer himself.

Formalism was different in the sense that it did not consider the text as a mirror or a lamp. It looked at the text as an entity in itself. The Formalists did not search inside texts for ideas from the outside world or about the authors themselves. For the first time, the text has come to acquire its own identity. Readers and critics should look inside a text, not outside it.

The Formalists de-emphasized the historical context of the text, the biographical context of the text, and the content of the text. According to the formalists, context (biographical, historical, social, religious, economic,

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political, psychological, philosophical) can at times enslave or cloud our judgment: Prejudging a Shakespearean sonnet or a Wordsworthian poem.

This approach required full acquaintance with literary terms. The formalists emphasized the “literariness” of the text. They stated that the most important thing to study is the text, the whole text and nothing but the text. Therefore, if we are to analyze a literary text, we have to examine the form and structure style (language, figures of speech, diction, sentence structure, rhetorical devices, levels of usage), literary devices and techniques, imagery and their types, plot, characterization (character types), irony, foreshadowing, ambiguity, point of view, suspense, symbolism, tone, themes and motifs, etc.

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