Modernism, Formalism, and Structuralism

The beginning of the 20th century marked a significant shift in ideas pertaining to literature, particularly—though not exclusively—in Europe and the United States.

Modernism

Enduring through the first half of the 20th century, the literary movement known as modernism developed as a virtual denunciation of preceding aesthetic traditions—including Romanticism, a major artistic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as the 19th-century predominance of realist, naturalist, and Gothic influences displayed in many novels of the Victorian period. Modernism, in contrast, was preoccupied with a new, distinctly pessimistic worldview that emerged among artists who saw themselves responding to a chaotic and unstable contemporary world that was characterized by the social, political, and philosophical upheavals occurring in Europe and the U.S. at the turn of the century.

In particular, modernism marked a turn toward innovative uses of traditional literary modes and techniques. New forms of narrative that defied convention were seen in the works of writers such as Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Franz Kafka. Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) employed an ambitious stream-of-consciousness narrative and experimental style that Joyce developed further in his masterpiece, Ulysses (1922), now considered an iconic modernist novel. British author Virginia Woolf also gave voice to the interior world of her protagonists through her use of stream-of-consciousness in her novels Mrs. Dalloway (1925) and To the Lighthouse (1927). American authors such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald also became pioneers of modernism; Fitzgerald’s nuanced portrayal of 1920s excess in The Great Gatsby (1925) led to the book’s status as one of the great American novels.

In the genre of poetry, American modernist poet Ezra Pound abandoned traditional rhyme and meter and initiated an innovative form of poetics that came to be known as free verse, displayed in such works as Pound’s poem “The Return” (1912). Another poet closely associated with modernism was T.S. Eliot. His poem The Waste Land (1922) relied on techniques that represented a divergence from and challenge to previous poetic and aesthetic traditions. The poem’s fragmented structure, which employs multiple voices, points of view, and shifts in time, has been referred to by critics as a montage—a collection of fragments aligned in one artistic enterprise; that is, a kind of literary collage. Eliot’s use of this collage aesthetic made his work unique and paved the way for other experimental works that would characterize the modernist movement.

The modernist era also saw an increase in the diversity of literary voices. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, for example, involved an upsurge of literature and art by African Americans such as Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Aaron Douglas, and Romare Bearden.

Formalism
With the early 20th century’s new forms of literature also came new ways of approaching literary theory and criticism. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the meaning and value of a literary work had been understood primarily by elements outside the work—such as the author’s intention for the work, or the historical context from which the work emerged—rather than the work’s internal structural elements and use of language. Two new critical movements—namely, Russian formalism and American New Criticism—challenged this traditional approach to reading texts. These schools of criticism, often known collectively for their formalist theories, drew attention to literary works as distinctly literary artifacts, able to be studied in their own right—rather than solely as reflections of an author’s intention, or the biographical aspects of the work, or the historical moment in which the work was composed.

Russian formalism, associated with Russian critics Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson (among others), aimed to ascertain the qualities of a literary work as a kind of scientific object, emphasizing the so-called literariness of the text. American New Criticism, led by American critics such as John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks, also focused on the internal workings of the text, rejecting the author’s biography and emphasizing the importance of analysis-driven close readings of literary works.

**Structuralism**

Russian formalism’s intense interest in the major questions informing the practice of literary criticism (i.e., what makes a literary work literary) greatly influenced other critical schools that emerged in Europe. Most importantly, the literary theory known as structuralism developed as an outgrowth of linguistic theories aiming to understand the relationship between language and the human experience. While similar to New Criticism in its emphasis on close readings of the text, structuralism evolved as a distinct school of literary criticism.

According to the Swiss theorist most commonly associated with structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), language is the foundational structure that informs all human experience—our ways of knowing the world and, therefore, our reality. Saussure understood language as an overriding structural system whose components—which he referred to as signs—gain meaning in relation to one another only when they are considered within the overriding structural system. For example, specific words are given value through their place within a particular language; they do not contain pre-existing concepts and ideas in and of themselves. Consider, for instance, the word *sister*. According to structuralism, there is no inherent value bound to the construction of the letters *s-i-s-t-e-r*, but there is a concept attached to the word that is signaled by this linguistic unit; in this case, the English language gives meaning to the utterance *sister*. Saussure named the overriding system of language the *langue* and referred to its utterance, or the active use of the language in everyday life, as *parole*. As an approach to reading literary texts, structuralism emphasizes the importance of examining linguistic structural elements as they manifest in a literary work and looking for patterns that reveal the systematic nature of language and its uses in literature.

Subsequent schools of literary criticism, such as New Historicism and reader-response theory, criticize structuralism for what they perceive as an overly narrow focus on the
internal machinations of a text at the expense of other influential factors—such as a work’s historical and political context (in the case of New Historicism) and the role a reader plays in producing the meaning of a work (in the case of reader-response theory). In contrast with structuralist critics, New Historicist critics understand a literary work as dynamically engaged with historical events; they approach a text as a way of understanding how we interpret historical moments (rather than simply recording them). Instead of emphasizing the linguistic structure of a text, as does structuralism, New Historicism aims to unveil the subjective nature of our understanding of history itself.

Despite the critical challenges to structuralism that have emerged in the 20th century, the structuralist theoretical school has continued to influence subsequent literary schools as well as our contemporary reading of literature, ensuring that we acknowledge the role of language in forming cultural meaning and the importance of a work’s internal structure in creating its overall significance as a piece of literature.