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BA English Honours | Semester IV | ENG4CJ204

Literary Criticism

Module 4: Delving into Modernity: Impersonality, New Criticism, and Psychoanalysis • Comprehensive Notes

Chapter 4: Modernist Criticism, Formalism, and Psychoanalytic Hermeneutics

The twentieth century brought radical epistemological ruptures marked by World War I, industrial alienation, and psychological revolutions. Modernist criticism reacted vigorously against Romantic biographical indulgence and Victorian moralizing, demanding rigorous formal autonomy, intellectual discipline, and psychological depth.

4.1 T. S. Eliot: Impersonality and Tradition

T. S. Eliot's 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" stands as the cornerstone of Anglo-American modernist criticism. Eliot forcefully attacks Romantic expressive individualism:

- **The Concept of Tradition:** Tradition is not a dead, blind repetition of past forms; it requires a profound "historical sense"—a perception of the presence of the past. When a truly new artwork is created, the entire preexisting literary monuments are slightly readjusted, maintaining dynamic equilibrium.
- **The Impersonal Theory of Poetry:** *"Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."* Eliot compares the mind of the poet to a shred of platinum in a chemical catalyst: combining sulphur dioxide and oxygen into sulphuric acid while the platinum remains completely unaffected and neutral.

4.2 Anglo-American New Criticism and Close Reading

Dominating mid-twentieth-century academic literary pedagogy, New Criticism (championed by Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren) insisted upon the absolute ontological autonomy of the literary text. Rejecting historical, biographical, and sociological external contexts, New Critics treated the poem as a self-contained verbal icon, deciphering structural tensions through close textual reading (irony, paradox, ambiguity, and metaphor).

4.3 Wimsatt and Beardsley: The Critical Fallacies

W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley authored two foundational texts eliminating extraneous biographical and psychological baggage from literary evaluation:

- **The Intentional Fallacy (1946):** Confusing the poem with its psychological origins in the author's mind. The author's personal intention is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the aesthetic success of a text. Once published, the poem belongs to public language.
- **The Affective Fallacy (1949):** Confusing the poem with its emotional results in the psychological state of the reader. Judging art by emotional goosebumps or subjective impressions leads to critical relativism.

4.4 Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism: Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic discoveries revolutionized literary hermeneutics by revealing that artistic creation mirrors dream-work and the unconscious mind. In his 1928 paper "Dostoevsky and Parricide," Freud applies the Oedipus Complex to analyze Fyodor Dostoevsky's neurosis, epilepsy, and literary

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representation of father-murder in *The Brothers Karamazov*, demonstrating how creative writing sublimation allows repressed unconscious guilt to achieve profound artistic catharsis.

Advanced Critical Theory, Hermeneutics & Literary Praxis

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Critical inquiry into Module 4: Delving into Modernity: Impersonality, New Criticism, and Psychoanalysis reveals how textual forms construct meaning through complex aesthetic strategies and structural choices:

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