

# BRIEF OVERVIEW

## (MID TERM SYLLABUS)

### Romanticism:

**Romanticism** was an artistic and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century characterized by a heightened interest in nature and an emphasis on individual expression of emotion and imagination. Romanticism flourished from the early to the mid-nineteenth century, partly as a reaction to the rationalism and empiricism of the previous age (the Enlightenment). In fiction, Romanticism is often expressed through an emphasis on the individual (a main character) and the expression of his or her emotional experience, such as by having the plot coincide with the character's emotional conflicts. In opposition to the logic of the previous age, Romantic fiction sometimes even returns to Gothic elements, which often includes stories about the supernatural or the uncanny. (An example of this literary movement in this module is Edgar Allan Poe's "A Descent into the Maelström.")

### Realism:

**Realism** was an artistic and intellectual movement of the late nineteenth century that stressed the faithful representation of reality or **verisimilitude**. Realism was a reaction to what were viewed as the exaggerations or flights of fancy of Romanticism. Realists sought to develop an artistic style that valued the faithful portrayal of everyday experience, what Henry James described as "the drama of a broken tea cup." The development of realism coincided with the rise of social reform movements and many realistic writers and artists chose to focus on social issues, such as poverty and the plight of the working class, in cities as well as in the country. The height of realist writing in American literature is considered to have occurred from the time of the U.S. Civil War (c. 1865) to the turn of the century (c. 1900). Realism as a literary movement swept across the country. This wave also fostered an interest in **Regionalism**, the realistic portrayal of specific areas and locales almost as a fictional form of travel literature. It should be noted that literary realism was equally popular in Europe, such as in the work of Charles Dickens or George Eliot in England, Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert in France, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy in Russia.

### Naturalism:

Overlapping with the development of Realism was the literary movement known as **Naturalism** (approximately 1880–1930). Naturalist literature sought to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to the characters and subjects represented in novels and short fiction. In this way, Naturalism is influenced more by philosophical ideals than literary

techniques including, though not exclusively, existentialism and social determinism. Characters in naturalistic stories frequently confront social conditions or personal conflicts which cannot be reconciled through the exercise of free will alone; these characters may fall upon tragic circumstance due to their social class, the harsh realities of nature or the inner strife of conflicting emotions, morals, and passions. Naturalist authors borrowed some of the stylistic innovations of Realism, yet often felt Realist works did not portray everyday experience in its full grit and trauma, remaining more to middle class tastes. In order to convey what they felt to be the harshness of life circumstances across the spectrum of human experience, some Naturalist writers combined elements of Realism (a focus on the everyday) with elements of Romanticism (a focus on emotion and symbolism) in order to portray what they understood to be the futility of human striving in an indifferent universe.

## Surrealism

**Surrealism** in literature can be defined as an artistic attempt to bridge together reality and the imagination. Surrealists seek to overcome the contradictions of the conscious and unconscious minds by creating unreal or bizarre stories full of juxtapositions.

Founded by André Breton (1896-1966), surrealism began as an artistic movement in Paris in the 1920s and lasted until the 1940s. Writer and philosopher Breton propelled this movement with his publication of *The Manifesto of Surrealism*, as a way of fighting against the way art was understood at the time.

With the horrors of World War I still in Europe's wake, art had become controlled by politics. It came to be used as a way of maintaining order and keeping the revolution at bay. However, surrealists wanted to break free from the constraints being posed on art and to do so in an extreme, yet positive way.

Though they fought against political control, the movement's goal was not political in nature. Surrealism sought to free people spiritually and psychologically. These artists and writers wanted to repair the damage done by WWI. Unfortunately, World War II was on the brink, and such a movement made the surrealists a target. During the rise of Nazism and Fascism, many surrealists were forced to seek haven in America. Fortunately, for American culture, their ideas began affecting changes in the States as well.

While the movement itself may have ended, surrealism still exists in much of today's literature. Using surrealist imagery, ideas, or poetic techniques, writers attempt to stretch the boundaries, free the mind, and make readers think.

## New Criticism

Post-World War I school of Anglo-American literary critical theory that insisted on the intrinsic value of a work of art and focused attention on the individual work alone as an independent unit of meaning. It was opposed to the critical practice of bringing historical or biographical data to bear on the interpretation of a work.

The movement emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. The movement derived its name from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*.

The work of Cambridge scholar I. A. Richards, especially his *Practical Criticism* and *The Meaning of Meaning*, which offered what was claimed to be an empirical scientific approach, were important to the development of New Critical methodology.<sup>[1]</sup> Also very influential were the critical essays of T. S. Eliot, such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Hamlet and His Problems", in which Eliot developed his notion of the "objective correlative". Eliot's evaluative judgments, such as his condemnation of Milton and Dryden, his liking for the so-called metaphysical poets, and his insistence that poetry must be impersonal, greatly influenced the formation of the New Critical canon.

## Russian formalism

**Russian formalism** was a school of literary criticism in Russia from the 1910s to the 1930s. It includes the work of a number of highly influential Russian and Soviet scholars such as Viktor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynianov, Vladimir Propp, Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsky, Grigory Gukovsky who revolutionised literary criticism between 1914 and the 1930s by establishing the specificity and autonomy of poetic language and literature. Russian formalism exerted a major influence on thinkers like Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman, and on structuralism as a whole. The movement's members had a relevant influence on modern literary criticism, as it developed in the structuralist and post-structuralist periods. Under Stalin it became a pejorative term for elitist art.

Russian formalism was a diverse movement, producing no unified doctrine, and no consensus amongst its proponents on a central aim to their endeavours. In fact, "Russian Formalism" describes two distinct movements: the OPOJAZ (*Obshchestvo Izucheniia Poeticheskogo Yazyka*, Society for the Study of Poetic Language) in St. Petersburg and the Moscow Linguistic Circle. Therefore, it is more precise to refer to the "Russian Formalists", rather than to use the more encompassing and abstract term of "Formalism".

The term "formalism" was first used by the adversaries of the movement, and as such it conveys a meaning explicitly rejected by the Formalists themselves. In the words of one of the foremost Formalists, Boris Eichenbaum: "It is difficult to recall who coined this name, but it was not a very felicitous coinage. It might have been convenient as a simplified battle cry but it fails, as an objective term, to delimit the activities of the "Society for the Study of Poetic Language."

## Existentialism

Existentialism is a movement in philosophy and literature that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It began in the mid-to-late 19th Century, but reached its peak in mid-20th Century France. It is based on the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It focuses on the

question of human existence, and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence. It holds that, as there is no God or any other transcendent force, the only way to counter this nothingness (and hence to find meaning in life) is by embracing existence.

## **Absurdism**

**Absurdism** is a philosophical stance embracing a wide range of relativist perspectives, which implies that the efforts of humanity to find or absolutely define, limit, express or exclude the inherent meanings of anything, including human existence, are **absurd** due to actual lack of meaning and the qualities of communicable information available to the human mind, and relationships within reality makes any certainty about such impossible. Absurdist assessments stand in contrast to many assumptions of absolutism. Philosophical schools of absurdism explore the fundamental nature of the Absurd and how individuals, once they become aware of it, can or should react to it and to circumstances they encounter. A particular form of existentialism, it was strongly evident in some of the works of Søren Kierkegaard, but was more expressly developed by Albert Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* and his works of Absurdist fiction repudiating many assumptions found in atheistic nihilism and theistic existentialism as well as those of authoritarianism. It has far earlier expression in many significant statements of ancient philosophers, namely Zhuangzi. In many ways it relates to the disciplines of semiotics, stances of extreme skepticism, overtly absurd faith, strong agnosticism, many forms of mysticism, art, magic, magical realism, and works in the genre which Martin Esslin called the "Theatre of the Absurd."