New Criticism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of New Criticism:
New Criticism makes arguments about how a text creates and communicates its meaning. Thus in New Criticism, the critic’s (your) argument must identify both the meaning of the text and the major literary device (the style) the text uses to create or communicate that unified meaning. The more specific your argument is in identifying both the meaning and the style of the text, the more successful the argument will be. For example, it is not enough to say simply that a text uses or has symbolism; instead, you must identify and discuss a particular symbol or a particular type of symbolism or a particular purpose of the symbolism the text uses as well as the meaning that symbolism reveals.

In addition, New Criticism focuses entirely on your close reading, explication, interpretation, and analysis of the text: what you notice, how and why it stands out, and your understanding of the significance each observation has for the meaning and purpose of the text. While you never use “T” or refer to reading or writing about the text, of course, it is your mind at work, your powers of observation, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis that you are presenting, proving, and developing.

So a good way to get started is to ask yourself questions: What literary devices (listed on the following pages or others) do I notice in this text? What stands out, where, and why? How does each element I notice contribute to the meaning of the text? Note: While the most extreme (and now outdated) version of New Criticism might argue for a single “universal” (agreed-upon) meaning, for our purposes, we will start with the premise that there is not just one possible meaning for any given text, but many possibilities. You are, however, limited to and responsible for just one. That one meaning, how it is communicated, and why it is communicated in that way is your argument.

What to avoid when reading and writing using the lens of New Criticism:
New Criticism focuses entirely on the text; anything outside the text is considered irrelevant:
1. Thus New Critics do not concern themselves with the effect of the text on the reader or the reader’s emotions (affect). This concern is referred to as the Affective fallacy.
2. Biographical and historical/cultural information about the author or the time in which the author wrote is either de-emphasized or excluded when New Critics analyze the text. Outside information may be referred to if it is vital to understand the subject of a text, but the meaning and purpose of the text must be proved with analysis and close reading (explication) of the text and how it communicates that meaning/purpose.
3. Similarly, New Critics do not concern themselves with the author’s intentions—what he or she intended to say—as this intention is considered outside the text. Thus this approach is referred to as the Intentional fallacy.
4. Paraphrase in New Criticism is perhaps the greatest heresy as the purpose of New Criticism is to interpret the meaning of the text by analyzing how the text communicates that meaning, something which paraphrase, because of its focus on content alone, cannot do. Also, New Critics believe any change to the text, including summary or paraphrase, which changes its words, changes its meaning. Thus failing to quote in a paper using the approach of New Criticism demonstrates a lack of understanding of this literary theory.
Final note:
Every literary analysis essay you write employs New Criticism to some degree, at the very least focusing on the text sufficiently to identify its argument (meaning and/or purpose) and to prove that argument with evidence from the text and your interpretation of it.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of New Criticism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:

Key Terms/Concepts:

Most terms are defined in the “Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms” at the end of Reading and Writing about Literature by Janet E. Gardner and/or in the body of the book itself (see the index at the end of the book). Those that *aren’t* defined are defined below, and some that *are* defined are given more explanation.

1. Diction: abstract and concrete language, denotation, connotation
   a. *etymology: the history of a word. Detailed information on the history of words can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) which can be useful in determining a word’s specific meaning or meanings at the time it was used.
2. Allusion
3. Literal language
4. Figurative language
5. *Imagery/image conveys sensory experience in essence by creating that sensation or object in the reader’s imagination (often sight but also sound, smell, taste, touch, motion. Images can be literal or figurative. See below.)
7. *A figurative image suggests the essence of a thing by comparing it to the sight, sound, etc., of something else. Figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes, are generally images though not always.
8. Figure of speech: metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, symbol, synesthesia, allegory, hyperbole, understatement, paradox, oxymoron.
9. *Mimesis means imitation (mimicry) or representation (see Imitation in the glossary), in this case, literature imitating or representing life. Texts reflect or represent—in their form, structure, imagery, etc.—the real, natural, and/or human experience they depict, enabling or compelling readers to share that experience. Often, the reader’s experience of the text or response to it is made to mimic the characters’.
10. Sound: alliteration, cacophony, euphony, consonance, assonance, onomatopoeia
11. *Motifs are the repeated or recurrent patterns—words, phrases, images, objects, sounds, scenes, structures, concepts, themes, etc.,—that unify the text and work together to communicate its meaning, effect, and/or purpose.
12. *Ambiguity in literature is found in words, statements, or situations, etc., that have more than one possible meaning. These possibilities make the text more complex and interesting and more meaningful, and are analyzed to reveal their effect and purpose.
13. Irony: dramatic, situational, verbal
14. *Unity is the oneness or coherence of a text—short story, poem, novel, play—seen in the way its parts or elements work together to create a sense of it as an organic whole.
15. *Tension occurs between seemingly contradictory elements of the text—irony, ambiguity, paradox—contradictions, which the reader/critic must resolve or reconcile in order to make meaning and to make of the text a unified whole. These elements that resist unity do not detract from a text but rather signal its greater complexity, interest, and significance.
16. Point of View
17. Narrator
18. Character
19. Protagonist
20. Antagonist
21. Voice
22. Speaker
23. Tone
24. Structure/Form
25. *Pace/Pacing is the speed at which a text moves due to its form and content, often determined by the length, and its variety or monotony, of a line or sentence, stanza or paragraph, and section, chapter, or scene, and in prose the use of description or exposition versus dialogue, and in drama the length of characters’ lines in a scene, etc., including silences and actions, etc. Syntax (sentence structure) and sentence types as well as rhythm/sound and diction also have an impact on pacing.
26. +Plot: climax, denouement. Short stories according to Alice Adams, typically follow ABDCE structure: action, background, development (movement of the plot forward, physically or psychologically), climax (or turning points), ending. Not all stories follow this order though most have all of these elements. Similarly, while plot in drama traditionally includes prologue or exposition, rising action, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe or denouement, not all plays follow this order or include all steps discretely, and modern plays may conform more to the ABDCE structure, again with some steps rearranged or merged.
27. Conflict
28. Flashback
29. Foreshadowing
30. Juxtaposition
31. Description
32. Exposition
33. Dialogue
34. Setting
35. *Defamiliarization is the way in New Criticism a text makes the familiar seem strange and thereby makes the reader aware of and open to new understanding of his or her reality as if he or she is seeing it for the first time.
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English 123

Sample Response Paper: Applying New Criticism to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”

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Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. One need do no more than read her story using the lens of New Criticism to notice her implicit cynicism. Indeed, her story “The Lottery” paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

Without a doubt, the ending of the story paints a clear picture of human brutality. The act of stoning is itself violent, a killing that is enacted up close in which the killer sees and is seen by the victim. In addition, the horror and brutality are heightened by the fact that the ritual requires the participation of the entire village, including children and even the family members of the victim, not just in the selection process but in the killing as well. No one, except the victim, is exempt from this violence, or blameless for it, as the story illustrates early on by having “[i]he children assemble[] first [as a matter] of course” (963), echoed at the end when “someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles” (969). The diminutive phrase “little Davy Hutchinson” is
transformed with the addition of “a few pebbles” so that in this context it no longer evokes innocence but culpability, showing us how the community teaches their traditions to the next generation, thus perpetuating those traditions and making sure everyone is equally guilty. The final image of the story is of the village as a mob, descending on Tessie Hutchinson. Notably absent is any sort of metaphor; the villagers are not compared to beasts or monsters. Instead, they are described simply, straight-forwardly as collectively “remember[ing] to use stones” though other parts of the ritual have been forgotten, urging each other on, making choices that reflect individual abilities and tendencies, such as the number and size of stones to use (639), behaviors that are all inescapably human. The savagery, too, then must be recognized and condemned as human.

The cynicism reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by Shirley Jackson’s story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson’s appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.