

Analysing Literary Texts: A Formalist Approach

الدكتور: رمضان مهيري

الدكتور: أحمد شوقي حواجلي

قسم الآداب واللغات الأجنبية

كلية الآداب واللغات

جامعة محمد خيضر - بسكرة

Abstract

To analyse fiction requires more than the content knowledge of a text. In the last century, and for more than seven decades, there were many attempts to approach literature from a scientific perspective by a growing number of critics. Their goal was to examine aesthetic and moral aspects of any literary product, relying on its form (how it is said or written) rather than its content (what is said or written), a practice that could have met the norms of modernity and that would have led to more objectivity in literary studies. This present study is primarily devoted to literature in the era of formalism, the features and principles of the latter, as well as a practical activity for the students to consider concrete exemplification. Additionally, by reviewing some related literature and, at the same time, relying on our observations, this study also aims to investigate the study of literary texts from a historical perspective.

Key words: Content, literary texts, text analysis, scientific perspective, formalism, and historical perspective.

ملخص:

تحليل الخيال يتطلب أكثر من المعرفة بمحتوى النص. ففي القرن الماضي، ولأكثر من سبعة عقود، كانت هناك العديد من المحاولات لمقاربة الأدب من منظور علمي من قبل عدد كبير من النقاد. كان هدفهم دراسة الجوانب الجمالية والأخلاقية لأي منتج أدبي، والاعتماد على شكله (كيف يقال أو يكتب) بدلا من محتواه (ما يقال أو ما يكتب)، وهي ممارسة يمكن أن تكون قد استوفت معايير الحداثة والتي من شأنها أن تؤدي إلى مزيد من

الموضوعية في الدراسات الأدبية . هذه الدراسة تخصص في المقام الأول إلى الأدب في عصر الشكلائية، ومميزات ومبادئ هذه الأخيرة ، فضلا عن تطبيقات للطلاب للنظر في مثال ملموس . بالإضافة إلى ذلك، من خلال استعراض بعض الاعمال ذات الصلة وفي نفس الوقت الاعتماد على ملاحظاتها، تهدف هذه الدراسة أيضا إلى التحقيق في دراسة النصوص الأدبية من منظور تاريخي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المحتوى 'النصوص الادبية' الشكلائية' الدراسة التاريخية.

1. A Brief History of Formalism

The formalist tradition developed in Russian literary criticism in the late nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, especially in the work of the Moscow Linguistic Circle. The most well-known and influential figure of Russian Formalism was Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) whose work focused on defining the qualities of what he termed 'poetic language'. Jakobson advocated that the poetic function of language is realised in those communicative acts where the focus is on the message rather than the emotions of the author. Jakobson's ideas and work and ideas had a considerable influence on the development of other studies such as stylistics.

Adapted from Busse, B. and McIntyre, D. (2010) 'Language, literature and stylistics', in McIntyre, D.

and Busse, B. (eds) Language and Style, pp. 3-14. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

2. Identification of the Formalist Approach

The Formalist Approach aims to make of a literary work a scientific object, focusing on the text's internal workings (www.salor.org/ENGL 301 Sub-subunit 2.3.1). Therefore, this approach can be simply identified through the perception of the following distinctive features.

- Literature can be read from different perspectives.
- The literariness or artfulness of a work of literature which makes it an aesthetic object, lies entirely in its devices, which should also form the sole object of literary studies.
- The formalist approach focuses on the *form* of the literary text itself.

- The formalist approach regards literature as a very specific unit of human knowledge that has to be examined on its own terms and for its own sake.

Russian Formalism and American New Criticism can be considered as two facets of the same coin. Both approaches emphasised the analysis of texts through close readings. Moreover, they rejected the author's biography and highlighted instead the *literariness* of the text (ibid).

2.1 Advantages

Below are some strong points of the formalist approach as far as the researchers are concerned. They stem out of the connections they make between Linguistics, their major field of interest, and Literary Criticism.

- Literature can be read from different perspectives.
- The literariness of a work of literature which makes it an aesthetic object, lies entirely in its devices, which should also form the sole object of literary studies.
- The formalist approach focuses on the *form* of the literary text itself.
- The formalist approach regards literature as a very specific unit of human knowledge that has to be examined on its own terms and for its own sake.

2.2 Disadvantages

Nonetheless, formalism received a counteroffensive in the 1950s. A concrete example of this harsh criticism of formalism is Herbert Read's article 'Farewell to Formalism' in which he refuses to accept some principles of analysis which could not account for the artist's sensibility (Tekiner, 2006, pp. 36-37). The researchers consider the following as weak points in the formalist approach :

- The author's biography is not important.
- The political, economic, cultural, and social circumstances in which the text was written are not important.
- Defamiliarisation which seeks to enhance the readers' perception of the text is important.
- Focus on form, organisation, structure, word choice, and multiple language is important.

- the shift from the moral approach to the scientific one is important.
- The actual reader is not important.

3. A Checklist of Formalist Critical Questions

Here is a list of some questions from a formalist perspective. These questions can be applicable to the analysis of a short story or a novel where the ultimate aim is to approach meaning through several aspects of the form. Students are not, in fact, limited to the present list, but are, in the meantime, invited to think of other vivid representations that seek to equate between form and content.

- How is the work structured or organised? What is the work's plot?
- What is the theme ?
- How are the parts of the work related to one another?
- Who is narrating or telling what happens in the work? How is the narrator, speaker, or character revealed to readers?
- Who are the major and minor characters, what do they represent, and how do they relate to one another?
- What is the setting of the work? How is the setting related to what we know of the characters and their actions?
- What kind of language does the author use to describe, narrate, and explain in the literary work? What images, similes, metaphors, and symbols does the author use in the work? What is their function?

4. A Sample Activity: Analysing “A Handful of Dates” (by *Tayeb Salih*) from a Formalist perspective. Below are just some answers to questions taken from the preceding sections.

Question (1) : How is the work structured or organized? What is the work's plot?

The storyteller was with his grandfather when they started talking about a man Masood. The grandfather tells the storyteller that he owns 2/3 of the land Masood inherited from his father. The grandfather disdains Masood because he never had to work for what he was given and it seems like this is a driving motivation to continue obtaining land from him. The storyteller sees a harvest of dates, where at the end the grandfather states that Masood still owes him fifty pounds (of dates). This whole interaction saddens and sickens the storyteller so much so

that he runs away from his grandfather and vomits the few dates he had eaten.

Question (2) : What is the theme ?

The short story uses many different themes and literary techniques to tell a story of an innocent young boy discovering life's hardships. The three introductory paragraphs, for instance, contain background information about the grandfather, and a boy. These paragraphs reveal **that the boy is young, innocent, very intelligent, and possesses a great love for nature. His grandfather is a man of power**

Question (3) : Who is narrating or telling what happens in the work?

The boy is narrating the story from his own perspective (first person narrator). The reader receives the whole story from this perspective.

Question (4) : What is the setting of the work? How is the setting related to what we know of the characters and their actions?

The setting is **a harvest day in Masood's date field**, where various people from the town come, help and eat some of the dates. Once the harvesting has been finished, the grandfather four other men divide the product and take their share away. **The grandfather and the four men are considered to be the winners ; whereas, Masood, having many wives, has always been seen as a loser**, for most of his land has been sold to the boy's grandfather.

Conclusion

On the basis of what has gone before, one may come up with the the notes below:

- The Formalists came to see literature in systemic terms.
- They assumed that literature texts must have inherent qualities.
- Unlike structuralists who thought that the text as a whole has a function, formalists' function of the text has to do with how some devices achieve meaning.
- However, in reality, texts function as coherent structures; i.e. all devices are interrelated.

References

Busse, B. and McIntyre, D. (2010) 'Language, literature and stylistics', in McIntyre, D. and Busse,

B. (eds) *Language and Style*, pp. 3-14. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

DiYanni, R. (2008). *Literature Approaches to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw

Hill.

Teniker, D. (2006). Formalist Art Criticism and the Politics of Meaning. *Social Justice*, 33, 2

(104), 31-44.

WWW. islamiclit.wikidot.com/a-handful-of-dates-by-tayeb-sa...Retrieved November 25th, 2015.

www.salor.org/ENGL_301_Sub-subunit_2.3.1. Retrieved December 7th, 2015.

Appendixes

Appendix 1 :A Handful of Dates by Tayeb Salih

I must have been very young at the time. While I don't remember exactly how old I was, I do remember that when people saw me with my grandfather they would pat me on the head and give my cheek a pinch - things they didn't do to my grandfather. The strange thing was that I never used to go out with my father, rather it was my grandfather who would take me with him wherever he went, except for the mornings, when I would go to the mosque to learn the Koran. The mosque, the river, and the fields - these were the landmarks in our life. While most of the children of my age grumbled at having to go to the mosque to learn the Koran, I used to love it. The reason was, no doubt, that I was quick at learning by heart and the Sheik always asked me to stand up and recite the Chapter of the Merciful whenever we had visitors, who would pat me on my head and cheek just as people did when they saw me with my grandfather.

Yes, I used to love the mosque, and I loved the river, too. Directly we finished our Koran reading in the morning I would throw down my wooden slate and dart off, quick as a genie, to my mother, hurriedly swallow down my breakfast, and run off for a plunge in the river. When tired of swimming about, I would sit on the bank and gaze at the strip of water that wound away eastwards, and hid behind a thick wood of

acacia trees. I loved to give rein to my imagination and picture myself a tribe of giants living behind that wood, a people tall and thin with white beards and sharp noses, like my grandfather. Before my grandfather ever replied to my many questions, he would rub the tip of his nose with his forefinger; as for his beard, it was soft and luxuriant and as white as cotton wool - never in my life have I seen anything of a purer whiteness or greater beauty. My grandfather must also have been extremely tall, for I never saw anyone in the whole area address him without having him look up at him, nor did I see him enter a house without having to bend so low that I was put in mind of the way the river wound round behind the wood of acacia trees. I loved him and would imagine myself, when I grew to be a man, tall and slender like him, walking along with great strides.

I believe I was his favorite grandchild: no wonder, for my cousins were a stupid bunch and I - so they say - was an intelligent child. I used to know when my grandfather wanted me to laugh, when to be silent; also I would remember the times for his prayers and would bring him his prayer rug and fill the ewer for his ablutions without his having to ask me. When he had nothing else to do he enjoyed listening to me reciting to him from the Koran in a lilting voice, and I could tell from his face that he was moved.

One day I asked him about our neighbor Masood. I said to my grandfather: I fancy you don't like our neighbor Masood? To which he answered, having rubbed the tip of his nose: He's an indolent man and I don't like such people. I said to him: What's an indolent man?

My grandfather lowered his head for a moment; then, looking across the wide expanse of field, he said: Do you see it stretching out from the edge of the desert up to the Nile bank? A hundred feddans. Do you see all those date palms? And those trees - sant, acacia, and sayal? All this fell into Masood's lap, was inherited by him from his father.

Taking advantage of the silence that had descended on my grandfather, I turned my gaze from him to the vast area defined by words. I don't care, I told myself, who owns those date palms, those trees or this black, cracked earth - all I know is that it's the arena for my dreams and my playground.

My grandfather then continued: Yes, my boy, forty years ago all this belonged to Masood - two-thirds of it is now mine.

This was news for me, for I had imagined that the land had belonged to my grandfather ever since God's Creation.

I didn't own a single feddan when I first set foot in this village. Masood was then the owner of all these riches. The position had changed now, though, and I think that before Allah calls me to Him I shall have bought the remaining third as well."

I do not know why it was I felt fear at my grandfather's words - and pity for our neighbor Masood. How I wished my grandfather wouldn't do what he'd said! I remembered Masood's singing, his beautiful voice and powerful laugh that resembled the gurgling of water. My grandfather never laughed.

I asked my grandfather why Masood had sold his land.

Women, and from the way my grandfather pronounced the word I felt that women was something terrible. Masood, my boy, was a much-married man. Each time he married he sold me a feddan or two. I made the quick calculation that Masood must have married some ninety women. Then I remembered his three wives, his shabby appearance, his lame donkey and its dilapidated saddle, his galabia with the torn sleeves. I had all but rid my mind of the thoughts that jostled in it when I saw the man approaching us, and my grandfather and I exchanged glances.

We'll be harvesting the dates today, said Masood. Don't you want to be there?

I felt, though, that he did not really want my grandfather to attend. My grandfather, however, jumped to his feet and I saw that his eyes sparkled momentarily with an intense brightness. He pulled me by the hand and we went off to the harvesting of Masood's dates.

Someone brought my grandfather a stool covered with an oxhide, while I remained standing. There was a vast number of people there, but though I knew them all, I found myself for some reason watching Masood: aloof from that great gathering of people he stood as though it were no concern of his, despite the fact that the date palms to be harvested were his own. Sometimes his attention would be caught by the sound of a huge clump of dates crashing down from on high. Once he shouted up at the boy perched on the very summit of the date palm who had begun hacking at a clump with his long, sharp sickle: Be careful you don't cut the heart of the palm.

No one paid any attention to what he said and the boy seated at the very summit of the date palm continued, quickly and energetically, to work away at the branch with his sickle till the clump of dates began to drop like something descending from the heavens.

I, however, had begun to think about Masood's phrase, the heart of the palm. I pictured the palm tree as something with feeling, something possessed of a heart that throbbed. I remembered Masood's remark to me when he had once seen me playing with the branch of a young palm tree: Palm trees, my boy, like humans, experience joy and suffering. And I had felt an inward and unreasoned embarrassment.

When I again looked at the expanse of ground stretching before me I saw my young companions swarming like ants around the trunks of the palm trees, gathering up dates and eating most of them. The dates were collected into high mounds. I saw people coming along and weighing them into measuring bins and pouring them into sacks, of which I counted thirty. The crowd of people broke up, except for Hussein the merchant, Mousa the owner of the field next to ours on the east, and two men I'd never seen before.

I heard a low whistling sound and saw that my grandfather had fallen asleep. Then I noticed that Masood had not changed his stance, except that he had placed a stalk in his mouth and was munching at it like someone sated with food who doesn't know what to do with the mouthful he still has.

Suddenly my grandfather woke up, jumped to his feet, and walked toward the sacks of dates. He was followed by Hussein the merchant, Mousa the owner of the field next to ours and two strangers. I glanced at Masood and saw that he was making his way toward us with extreme slowness, like a man who wants to retreat but whose feet insist on going forward. They formed a circle around the sacks of dates and began examining them, some taking a date or two to eat. My grandfather gave me a fistful, which I began munching. I saw Masood filling the palms of both hands with dates and bringing them up close to his nose, then returning them.

Then I saw them dividing up the sacks between them. Hussein the merchant took ten; each of the strangers took five. Mousa the owner of the field next to ours on the eastern side took five, and my grandfather took five. Understanding nothing, I looked at Masood and saw that his

eyes were darting to left and right like two mice that have lost their way home.

You're still fifty pounds in debt to me, said my grandfather to Masood. We'll talk about it later.

Hussein called his assistants and they brought along the donkeys, the two strangers produced camels, and the sacks of dates were loaded onto them. One of the donkeys let out a braying which set the camels frothing at the mouth and complaining noisily. I felt myself drawing close to Masood, felt my hand stretch out toward him as though I wanted to touch the hem of his garment. I heard him make a noise in his throat like the rasping of a sheep being slaughtered. For some unknown reason, I experienced a sharp sensation of pain in my chest.

I ran off into the distance. Hearing my grandfather call after me, I hesitated a little, then continued on my way. I felt at that moment that I hated him. Quickening my pace, it was as though I carried within me a secret I wanted to rid myself of. I reached the riverbank near the bend it made behind the wood of acacia trees. Then, without knowing why, I put my finger into my throat and spewed up the dates I'd eaten