What is formalist criticism?

- Approaches literature in itself
  - Is not concerned a lot with the historical, political, social, or biographical context surrounding the work
  - The critic pays special attention to the elements of the work

  - Fiction: Plot, point of view, characters, setting, tone and style, theme, symbol,
  - Poetry: kind of poem (lyric, didactic, epic, etc.), tone, words, imagery, figures of speech, sound, rhythm, form, symbol
  - Drama: modes of drama, plot, characters, climax, theme, setting, symbol
Critic do not usually just examine one element at a time, but how a few elements work together in a text to contribute to a specific effect.

Example: A critic might write about how point of view and setting work together in “A&P” to illustrate that when Sammy quits he thinks he is doing something heroic.
A key method many formalist critics use is close reading: a careful, step-by-step analysis of a text.
Though formalist critics are primarily concerned with looking at the work, that doesn’t mean they won’t research or take into account things like the author’s life (Biographical Criticism) or the psychology of the characters (Psychological Criticism), but that those things don’t become the MAIN focus of the analysis.
An example of a formalist analysis

- See Michael Clark’s “Light and Darkness in ‘Sonny’s Blues’” (pg. 2015)
- What specific element of fiction is being analyzed? (Hint: think about the terms on the beginning slide)
- Does the analysis seem to veer away from the work or include a lot of specific references to the work?
Popularity of Formalist Criticism

- Formalist theory has dominated the American literary scene for most of the twentieth century and has retained its great influence in many academic quarters.

- This approach is popular with scholars but also very popular in secondary education classes, where students do not have to know a lot about the context of a work was written in order to analyze it.
1. Literature is a form of knowledge with intrinsic elements--style, structure, imagery, tone, genre.

2. What gives a literary work status as art, or as a great work of art, is how all of its elements work together to create the reader's total experience (thought, feeling, gut reactions, etc.)

3. The appreciation of literature as an art requires close reading--a careful, step-by-step analysis and explication of the text (the language of the work). An analysis may follow from questions like, how do various elements work together to shape the effect on the reader?

4. Style and theme influence each other and can't be separated if meaning is to be retained. It's this interdependence in form and content that makes a text "literary." "Extracting" elements in isolation (theme, character, ploy, setting, etc.) may destroy a reader's aesthetic experience of the whole.

5. Formalist critics don't deny the historical, political situation of a work, they just believe works of art have the power to transcend by being "organic wholes"--akin to a being with a life of its own.

6. Formalist criticism is evaluative in that it differentiates great works of art from poor works of art. Other kinds of criticism don't necessarily concern themselves with this distinction.

7. Formalist criticism is decidedly a "scientific" approach to literary analysis, focusing on "facts amenable to "verification" (evidence in the text).