

# LITERARY THEORY

## NEW HISTORICISM

### Definition and Description:

New Historicism is often defined as looking at many outside sources right alongside a text because no one text can be considered objective. These outside sources can consist of anything that has to do with the author, the culture moment, and/or the text itself. New Historicists will look at anything from notes on a napkin to the writing journal of an author; from the author's political standpoint to what he/she preferred for breakfast. Everything plays a part, according to the New Historicist, for how history was made, and how meaning can be taken from a text. It is important to take into account that New Historicists believe that the history taught is history that has been molded to fit the ideal image people want of their country. Critics who get involved in New Historicism are going to be trying to uncover the possible secrets hidden in a text to see what might have really been happening by looking at the societal concerns of the author, or the historical times evidenced in the work, and of other cultural elements exhibited in the text, then meaning can be made with a valid interpretation; in other words making the line between history and literature very obscure. But literature can still have an influence on events just as events can have an influence on literature—these small details are what New Historicists will look for to find meaning.

However, New Historicists will also have their own biases according to the culture they grew up in, so that must be taken into consideration (and even acknowledged) when writing/reading through a New Historicist lens.

### Key People:

- Clifford Geertz
- Jonathan Dollimore
- Louis Montrose
- Michel Foucault
- Raymond Williams
- Stephen Greenblatt

### Websites:

- <http://www.sou.edu/English/Hedges/sodashop/RCenter/Theory/Explained/nhistexp.htm>
- <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/newhistoricism>
- <http://www-english.tamu.edu/pers/fac/myers/historicism.html>
- <http://www.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/newhistoricism.htm>
- <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/SESL/EngLit/ugrad/hons/theory/CultMaterialism.htm>
- <http://www.as.wvu.edu/~lbrady/383newhist.html>
- <http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/cultmat.htm>

### Questions:

- What kind of behaviors and models of practice does this work seem to reinforce?
- Why might readers at a particular time and place find this work compelling?
- Are there differences between my values and the values implicit in the work I am reading?
- Upon what social understanding does the work depend?
- Whose freedom of thought or movement might be constrained implicitly or explicitly by this work?
- What authorial biographical facts are relevant to the text?
- What other cultural events occurred surrounding the original production of the text? How may these events be relevant to the text under investigation?
- How does the text reveal and comment on the disparate discourses of the culture it depicts?
- What are the formative experiences in the writer's life?
- Who were the significant people in the writer's life?
- What texts affected the writer's thinking?
- What religious-spiritual issues were important to the writer?
- What was the general political stance of the writer?
- What social class did the writer's family occupy?
- What social class did the writer as an adult aspire to belong to?
- How much social power did the writer's family have?
- What social issues were important to the writer?
- What public roles did the writer assume?
- What one-word label would describe the voice of the writer in this text?
- What were the major events of the period? What resistance was there to them and what was its source?
- What were the major controversies of the period?
- Who were the major figures of the period? What was the source of their power and influence? Who or what opposed (or at least resented) their power and influence?
- How do the purposes of this text agree with, repeat, or conflict with other literary texts of the same era?
- How is the style of this text similar to or different from other literary texts of the era?
- How does this text fit (or not fit) into the nonliterary texts of the same period?
- How has this text influenced and been influenced by other texts?
- What would have attracted readers to this work at the time it was published? In later periods?
- What was its public and critical reception at the time of publication?
- What has changed about the way it has been read since its publication?
- What models of behavior does this work support?
- How have values changed since the work was published? How have values changed since the period in which it is set?

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- Has the text changed its culture or any other culture? If so, how?
- What various discourses do you meet in the text? Which ones are powerful?
- Which discourses represent the experience of people who have traditionally been overlooked, marginalized, or misrepresented?
- What conflicts do you discern in the text between the discourse of the powerful and that of the powerless?
- How do they influence and shape each other by agreeing, complementing, or contradicting each other?
- What are the social rules observed in the text?
- How does this text support or challenge the values, beliefs, and/or practices of the culture it depicts?
- What does the ideological stance imply about the culture it depicts, that of the author's time, and that of the subsequent periods?
- How does this text suggest that history does not necessarily proceed in an orderly, positive direction?
- As part of a "thick description" of a given culture at a given point in history, what does this literary work add to our tentative understanding of human experience in that particular time and place, including the ways in which individual identity shapes and is shaped by cultural institutions?
- How does the text promote ideologies that support and/or undermine the prevailing power structures of the time and place in which it was written and/or interpreted?
- Using rhetorical analysis, what does the literary text add to our understanding of the ways in which literary and non-literary discourses have influenced, overlapped with, and competed with one another at specific historical moments?
- What does the literary work suggest about the experience of groups of people who have been ignored, under-represented, or misrepresented by traditional history?
- Does the text offer to subvert official attitudes? If so, what attitudes generate the impulse toward subversion? Is such subversion "contained"? Does it resist containment? If the text suggests a rupture, is it a small distortion in a secure overarching system, or a subversion of a whole system?
- What formal problems does the text pose? Can any of them be accounted for by social pressures that de-form the text?
- What other discourses does the text draw on? Are the other discourses changed, deformed, or enriched by inclusion in the text? Or do they change, deform or enrich it?
- How do aesthetic and social discourses circulate and negotiate in the text?
- What institutions and cultural values encourage or constrain the production of the text? What are the assumptions in a culture which it is unaware of, yet which enable it to make sense of its world?

### Key Terms:

- **Carnival:** a social practice that mocks authority and reverses hierarchies
- **Cultural materialism:** the British counterpart of new literary historicism, significantly influenced by Marxist principles
- **Culture:** The sum of the social patterns, traits, and products of a particular time or group of people
- **Discourse:** a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience
- **Episteme:** The rules and constraints outside which individuals cannot think or speak without running the risk of being excluded or silenced
- **Information gap:** What our body tells us and what we have to know in order to function in society
- **Linear:** there is a definite beginning, middle, and end in regards to history (New Historicists don't believe this)
- **Master narrative:** a narrative told from a single cultural point of view that presumes to offer the only accurate version of history
- **Power:** the ability or official capacity to exercise control
- **Reflection theory:** literature's reflection, conscious or unconscious, of the social reality surrounding it; a reflection of the essence of a society
- **Self-positions:** the announcement of one's own political and philosophical leanings
- **Subaltern writers:** the group of people who do not belong to the dominant party and who challenge the hegemony of the powerful by making their cultures known and valued for their past and present
- **Subject:** Because of their assumption that language shapes subjectivity, postmodernists sometimes use the term that designates a position in a sentence in place of the word *person*
- **Symbolic Capital:** The critics role is to dismantle the dichotomy of the economic and the non-economic, to show that the most purportedly disinterested and self-sacrificing practices, including art, aim to maximize personal or symbolic profit
- **Teleological:** Purposefully going forward toward an unknown end (New Historicists don't believe this)
- **Thick description:** Describes the seemingly insignificant details present in any cultural practice that will reveal that culture