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## **Texts and Interpretations: Greenblatt's New Historicism and Bloom's Aesthetico-critical Method**

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**Abstract:** Different traditions of theorists have defined the relationship between literary text and history in myriad ways. In keeping with the tradition of the early Marxists of a literary work being a reflection of the economic base of the social, historical and cultural aspects of existence, Pierre Macherau and George Lukacs posited the role of literature in transfiguring the ideological structure in which it participated. Later when critics like Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin established a correlation between literature and ideology, language ceased to remain an instrument in the hands of the author and/or the reader, rather becoming a concrete narrator, not only representing the conditions of a particular space and time thereby mirroring lived experience, but also, with creating experiences anew, oftentimes not even corresponding to the objective reality. Further, theorists like Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan held the view that as soon as one is born and acquires language, one is constituted as a subject. Interpellation causes the notion of the 'self' or the 'subject' to be a construct of the ideology one inhabits and the language one uses. Mikhail Bakhtin also upheld that language had both ideological and dialogic overtones, therefore, considering form and content inseparable. He understood fiction to be immersed in the socio-historic rhetoric of the time of its composition – the 'heteroglossia' of language. In the first half of the twentieth century, New Critics and Formalists denounced acknowledgement of contingencies of any specific time or place in analysing a text, thus emphasising an objective interpretation. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when New Historicism arrived at the theoretical scene, it was against any kind of reading that pretended to be absolute, therefore recommending a non-linear, disjunctive and fragmented reading of the text. While Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism challenges the traditional historicist method of approaching a text, Hayden White's view tends to depart from it. In the light of these two models of approaching literature, this paper tries to locate Harold Bloom's discontent with the reduction of literature to history as he makes a case for aesthetics and canonisation.



**Keywords:** New Historicism, literary text, theory, history, interpretation.

The New Historicist approach towards the recording of history is a particularly interesting one in that it does not consider history to be an objective sequence of observations depicting what happened in a given time and place. It is rather a subjective narration influenced by the socio-cultural context of a historian in possession of ‘power’ in Foucauldian terms thus creating knowledge and not merely recording it, ushering in the dissemination of knowledge and the circulation of discourse.

Regardless of his commitment to producing objective readings, the historian can never manage to do so, because he cannot transcend his own values, experiences, and knowledge. Inevitably caught up in his own social and cultural contexts, the historian cannot escape the viewpoints provided by the ideas and institutions of his own day. Like the literary analyst, the historian who reads a “text” is involved in interpretation, reinforcing the subjectivity of any account of history. (Dobie 179)

Could that bring one to conclude that the history of British literature, prescribed to undergraduate and postgraduate students of English studies in universities across the world, is discriminatory? New Historicism’s answer to this question would be ‘yes’. The process of canon formation and the politics behind the unconscious (or conscious?) foregrounding of a select few ‘major writers’ against the background of ‘minor writers’ in each period of English literature could be critically evaluated using the method of New Historicism. There is nothing to be appropriated as high literature or low literature in this method of analysis. Every text is interpreted as a social document both statically reflecting and dynamically affecting the context that produced it. This might explain the superiority attributed to some writers like William Shakespeare and Jane Austen over others like Christopher Marlowe and Elizabeth Gaskell respectively, who blossomed in the garden of literature in almost the same time but were watered in dissimilar ways by the historians of the English literature. As per this practice, an investigation into the social, cultural, and political milieu in which these writers were writing might lead to a better understanding of the same.



Michel Foucault construed history to be neither teleological nor linear. According to him, every period in history has its own episteme that designates the parameters and standards to differentiate the good from the bad, resulting in exclusion and inclusion, permission and prohibition. There are systems in place for controlling and disseminating knowledge, thus culminating in homogenization and naturalisation of differences. Andrew Sanders' book *The Oxford History of English Literature* differs from its counterparts on this very account. Regarding the celebrated Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, in the introduction to his history, Sanders makes a case for canon formation to be driven by influence rather than pure arbitrariness:

Poets' Corner has always commemorated a surprisingly arbitrary selection of writers and, like any parallel attempt to draw up a canon or a list, generally represents the opinions of what a certain group of influential people have wanted to believe mattered to them and to their times. What the memorials in Poets' Corner represent is a loose series of decisions. All of them, in their time, considered decisions, which have subsequently been interpreted as categorical and canonical. This is how most canons come into being. The trouble with canons is that they not only become hollowed by tradition, they also enforce tradition. (3)

However, this raises another concern regarding the trade-off of the aesthetic hierarchy among the works of literature. In that case, can the New Historicist approach be called a more complete and wholesome reading of the text than the traditional historicist approach or is it rather an inadequate and insufficient methodology responsible for ripping off the artistic value of a text? Is not this approach more historical than literary? If yes, what are the ramifications and pitfalls that ensue? The universality and timelessness of a text as asserted by the New Critics was undoubtedly a matter of contemplation and demanded to be viewed with scepticism. But the New Historicists challenged its narrowness of view only in so far as it was not looking into the relations between text and cultural context. The Modernist aesthetics of Russian formalists such as Victor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization to enhance aesthetic perception has been rendered obsolete as well as incomplete in the light of New Historicism, faced with the idea that aesthetic expression informs the historical content rather than contest it. However, it might be of



importance to observe that the New Historical dispensation is unable to get past the blind spot of metaphysical assumptions that have been perpetuated since time immemorial. Deconstruction, however, accommodates this consideration, “History is within metaphysics, metaphysics is exceeded by deconstruction” (Waugh 306). This brings to the fore another question of whether deconstruction is falling into the same trap that it tries to lay for others? In a poststructuralist understanding in which everything is contained within language, is not literature being reduced to a mere rhetorical device rather than a historical one as in New Historicist interpretation?

Here, it becomes important to take into consideration Hayden White’s slight divergence from the idea of New Historicism in his essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact.” He deliberates upon the problem of subjectivity implicated in the representation of history by any historian in any scholarly discipline which could result from either his prejudices or, in the other case, his want for proficiency in that area. He raises a pertinent question of the position of the historical narrative which, throughout history, has been considered purely as a verbal artefact – one that claims to be a model of antique structures and processes that deny being subjects for experimentation and observation. While talking about the controversial relationship between myth and history, White argues in his essay that historical facts are substantiated by fictionalising the chronicles by the means of “emplotment” and those who intend to elicit a comprehensive picture of any particular event in history, must, in addition to what is available in terms of historical evidence, take help of “constructive imagination” – a term propounded by R. G. Collingwood and used by White – which however can, at the most, provide the historian with story elements forced to fall within certain recognisable situational patterns that could transpire reasonably. However, the entire process of erecting a story making use of story elements might, in all likelihood, be more contrived than actual and hence more false than realistic. In this respect, White writes:

The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterisation, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view,



alternative description strategies, and the like – in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or play. (84)

In his article, “The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt: On Poetics of Culture and the Interpretation of Shakespeare,” Jan R. Veenstra addresses the problem that occurs due to the lofty claims New Historicism throws with regards to its idea of hermeneutics involving contextualisation and the redefinition of meaning. However much it tries to assert the freshness of its own method against the traditional practices of interpretation, New Historicism turns out to be as comprehensive, and monological as its ancestor it tries to contest, and is not devoid of limitations “that the historicity of consciousness, or the subject’s finite intentional horizon, imposes on one’s critical labours” (197).

It, however, needs to be remembered that there are several other methodological inconsistencies and inadequacies in this framework of reading the text. Lai’s article, “Limits and Beyond: Greenblatt, New Historicism and a Feminist Genealogy,” serves to locate the discipline of New Historicism in the postmodern context of literary history and cultural studies discerning it as a more optimistic and “ethico-political” method of investigation, thus accommodating and explaining several attacks on New Historicism. More than tearing down the disciplinary walls between history and fiction, text and context, “it welcomes the breakdown of genres and invites the analysis of discontinuities, linking anecdotes to the disruption of our understanding history” (3).

Lai divides the article into two parts addressing the two stages of development of New Historicism vis-a-vis ‘panoptical self and power’ and ‘go-betweenness: wonder and resonance.’ In the first part, Lai describes how Greenblatt’s perception of language as an unstable, ‘self-fashioning’ and discursive power disconnected from reality together with his insistence on recognising the “epistemological divide between utterance and existence” (5) ultimately lends itself to the further realisation that language cannot be qualified or quantified and has a transcendental aspect tethered to it as it is both temporal and culture-specific all at once. Though every text is implicated within structures of power, it is not merely a passive rendition of the cultural context but also an active contributor to the production of the cultural context. In light of such thought progression, Greenblatt also concludes



pessimistically that subjectivity is indeed never practicable – the fetters that chain freedom of expression are many. He is receptive to the Althusserian concept of ideological state apparatuses in conditioning the individual selves into subjects.

The second half of the article poses greater significance as it weighs up the concepts of ‘wonder’ and ‘resonance’ in literature. One glance at the history of English literature might be enough for one to realise that both writers and critics since the beginning of time have upheld the role of literature in providing a sense of amazement. Feelings and emotions are expressed by the writer and savoured by the readers in full measure. Spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions, catharsis and bleeding on paper concerns the art of reading and writing as intrinsically as socio-political activism and didacticism. Alienation might be a pejorative term to Karl Marx but is celebrated in the artistic and aesthetic treatment of texts. Defamiliarization gains prominence. Resonance occurs when through negotiation, exchange and circulation, the boundaries between text and history, past and present, and reader and the text are rendered permeable. Indeed, what most New Historicists have done so far is actually to situate the literary text in its context and to recover as far as possible the repressed, contradictory or unknown historical meanings (or historicity) of the text. Then they examine the relationship between these historical and cultural meanings of the text and its bearing on the reader to arouse the reader’s cultural wonder at the resonance on both the past and the present (13).

This could account for the apparent difference in the portrayal of female protagonists in the eighteenth-century English novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *North and South*, and *Jane Eyre*. The writers of these works, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Charlotte Bronte respectively, were writing in and around the same time and in similar cultural contexts, but their novels have characters and situations quite often incompatible with each other, however similar they might be supposed to be by historians and critics due to their coming from women writers and having been written in a particular ‘age’. It is interesting to notice how not a single generic image of a woman of that time can be perceived in entirety reading the so-called classics of that age. *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South* are recently being compared in terms of the similarity in their plots and the relationships between the characters in the two



novels, but a close reading of both the works would reveal that they are pivoted on different philosophies altogether. *Jane Eyre* portrays the feminine in an altogether different light, even though it is situated in a similar time and space. All of these above-mentioned novels represent different social realities and cultural issues.

Therefore these novels might be inadequate in the hands of a historian who tries his luck drawing a complete picture of the late Romantic and early Victorian ages. Although all three of them portray psychologically realistic characters, there is a notable difference in the way they depict the social reality of the eighteenth century, especially how it shaped and influenced the psyche of the woman living, loving and laughing in those times. Austen had a marked Christian conservatism distinguishing all her writings from those of her literary contemporaries. There was an air of intellectuality pervading all her novels. However, her works were not as reactionary as *Jane Eyre*'s sensibilities would allow. Emotions were raised to an extreme in the Charlotte Bronte novel while *Pride and Prejudice* paints a picture of restrained passion accommodated well within the bounds of good mannerism and high culture. This makes the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* more relatable than those of *Jane Eyre*. Andrew Sanders aptly points out the uniqueness of Jane Austen amidst writers old and new in the following words:

Where new writers who had espoused Jacobin libertarianism spoke of rights, Austen referred to duties; where they look for steady human improvement, she remains sceptical about the nature of the fallen human condition. The late eighteenth-century cultivation of sensibility and sentiment, and the 'new' Romantic insistence on the propriety of passion, are consistently countered in her novels by an ironic exposure of affectation and by a steady affirmation of the virtues of restraint. (374-375)

While *Pride and Prejudice* represents the feminine sensibility as strong yet mature and graceful, *Jane Eyre* celebrates the passionate intensity and impulsiveness natural to a progressive woman – the woman is demanding her rights instead of choosing to be a delicate human being humbly succumbing to her fate as in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Morality assumes altogether different dimensions in each of these works.



At a cursory glance, *North and South* might appear to be a sister-novel of *Pride and Prejudice* on account of the striking similarities in the relationships that the characters of the two books share. However, *North and South*'s exclusivity lies not only in terms of the strong undertones of Marxist sensibility that it possesses but also in that the portrayal of the psyche of the woman of that time is poignantly distinctive. Elizabeth Gaskell's heroine Margaret Hale understands that for a woman to exude power it is necessary to be financially independent. The women in *North and South* do not seem to be relegated to a lower stratum in the society based on their gender. Margaret Hale rather holds a more respected position which is evident the moment when after the rejection of Mr. Thornton's marriage proposal by her, his ego comes crashing down. Some critics go on to draw parallels between the temperaments carried by Mr. Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice* and Miss Hale of *North and South*. In terms of forceful assertion of the independence of women, *Jane Eyre* also makes its presence felt on the literary scene of the same century. The equality of men and women finds vivid expression in both *North and South* and *Jane Eyre*. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice* resemble each other on the account that they emphasise marital interdependence.

Therefore, if a historian of literature has at his disposal only these three novels of the eighteenth century, he would merely be exposed to historical elements enamoured by fabrication of conjectures around the truth. So even though 'constructive imagination' finds its place here, it is as inefficient as it is inadequate in figuring the contours of the feminine sensibility at that time. The 'female' of that time cannot be apprehended as docile and imbecile; neither can she be understood as completely independent. She cannot be read as an intensely passionate human being full with desires and uncontrolled emotions, neither can she be read as a decent creature exuding grace. Therefore, apart from the socio-cultural context, certain other aspects such as the intention of the author and the historicity of consciousness cannot be undermined while interpreting a text to perform a complete reading of any text or any age. This might bring one to conclude that literature is not an all-purpose omnipotent tool for interpreting the history of a place, neither vice versa.



Coming to the problem of usefulness, what then could be the purpose of literature after all? Terry Eagleton differentiates sciences like botany from arts like literature with the purport that art and culture cater to humanistic concerns rather than technical ones, “with love, death and desire, rather than with the law of tort or the organic structure of decapods” (78). So is literature simply a means to an end or is it an end in itself? It is probably not so simple to compartmentalise literature into these rigid divisions. While I agree that Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto* are brilliant means to ends accomplishing what they set out to accomplish, I would also like to present my argument that it might not always be important for literature to be construed as a tool for social and political reform. Literature also has the potential to conjure up spheres of imagination for the reader.

In an essay entitled “The Decay of Lying,” Oscar Wilde (a major proponent of the Aesthetics movement known for his dictum of art for art’s sake) almost laments the decline of modern literature resulting from an upsurge in realism. He expresses his disappointment over the fact that literature has largely become fact-based and is more concerned with the representation of social reality. Realism has taken over Romanticism. “The ancient historians gave us delightful fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction” (2). It is important to mention here that even before Oscar Wilde’s wild ideas about the importance to understand that “All art is useless” (in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) took shape, Immanuel Kant in his *The Critique of Judgement* had deliberated at length on the necessity of disinterested judgement of taste and for art to have a “purposiveness without a purpose.”

A more recent critic, Harold Bloom, seems to be more concerned and influenced by the pleasures derived from literature. He is fiercely against the idea of reducing literature to a specific historical context. In what he denies to be read as his elegy to the western canon owing to his fondness for the same, Bloom digresses from this Kantian conceptualisation of aesthetics and makes a case for the autonomy of the aesthetic. He repudiates the critical imposition that Western literature draws heavily from Greek philosophy while attributing to the canons a “strangeness that we either never altogether assimilate or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies ... the tang of



originality must always hover in an inaugural aspect of any work that incontestably wins the agon with tradition and joins the Canon” (4). In diverging from the linguistic aspect of literature, Bloom posits his idea of the ‘anxiety of influence’ thus arguing for an intrinsic quality of literature:

Literature is not merely language; it is also the will to figuration the motive for metaphor that Nietzsche once defined as the desire to be different from oneself, but primarily, I think, to be different from the metaphors and images of the contingent works that are one’s heritage: the desire to write greatly is the desire to be elsewhere, in a time and place of one’s own, in an originality that must compound with inheritance, with the anxiety of influence. (12)

In the context of metaphysical poetry, Thomas Stearns Eliot has held the mechanism of sensibility, which necessitates a union of thought and feeling, as the hallmark of great literature. This was found to be slowly disappearing in writing beginning from John Milton and John Dryden due to dissociation of sensibility. Critics have debated on the literariness of literature since the beginning and have come up with diverse views each attributing the dependence of literature to one or the other discipline. The field of literature appears to be so interdisciplinary that it begins to lose its own being.

But what is essentially the essence of literature is the bone of contention. Even in such a reductive understanding of literature as nothing but an appealing arrangement of words, a dependence on the language employed in writing a given work of literary importance is to be accounted for. Can literature ever be read in isolation as a single separate discipline? Literature is perhaps more unique than other unique disciplines while also being more abstract. Literature might have its essence as well as existence in the dialogue between different disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, history, and sociology. The interstices lying between each of the other disciplines could be construed as fertile grounds for the situation and incubation of texts as they are written and read. This could be because literature reflects life, and life is organic. Life refuses to be confined within the fetters of one particular discourse. In such moments, I am led to conclude with the premise that literature is not contained within the limits of life; rather life is contained within the limitlessness of literature.



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