

Literary Theory and Literary Criticism
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Lecture - 18

Part A

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism

Hello and welcome to today's module on Literary Criticism and Literary Theory. In today's lecture we will be looking at New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. As usual this lecture will be covered in 2 modules, in the first of which we will place our emphasis on understanding new historicism. And in the second module, we will look at a cultural materialism and see, how it borrows from or differs from the first.

Now, what is new historicism? The term itself, new historicism was coined and given to us by the American critic Stephen Greenblatt in his book *Renaissance Self Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* and this book was published in 1980. So, we can safely assume that some of the time when the term new historicism gained currency. Now, the book itself, this was very brief and yet very seminal and it was seminal in that, it challenged a lot of conservative critical views about Jacobean theatre. More generally to renaissance theater and it linked lot of the renaissance place with much more closely to the political events of it is own time rather than the previous methods where previous critics had had not really explore this venue. Now, a simple definition of new historicism is that, it is a method based on the parallel reading of a literary text with that of a non literary text.

And usually both these texts are taken from the same time period from the same historical period; this is to say that new historicism at least seems to ostensibly refuse our privilege the literary text over the non literary one. Therefore, we understand that, what this basically achieves is to discard notions of a literary foreground and a historical background, which is usually the way criticism was approached till that point of time.

Instead what we have here is that, it practices a mode of study in which literary and non literary texts are given equal weightage. And this is suggested in the definition of new historicism itself, which was offered to us by another American new historical critic,

Louis Montrose. And this is where he defines it as a combined interest in the textuality of history and the historicity of texts. So, this is one of the dictums that has defined the spirit of new historicism itself.

The expression that, this interested in textuality of history and as well as in the historicity of texts. And you can see, how new historicism might seem to embody a paradox and this is because, it is an approach to literature in which there is not really much privileging of the literary over the... It is an approach to literature to reading literature which does not really privilege, the literary work itself.

So, typically a new historical essay would place the literary text within the framework of a non literary text that is taken from the same time period. Therefore, perhaps Greenblatt's main innovation from the viewpoint of literary study was to juxtapose the place of the renaissance period with the colonial practices pursued by all the major European powers of his time.

In this, he through this, he draws attention to the marginalization and the dehumanization of all the suppressed others as he would notice. Now, a new historical approach usually starts by an essay with an analysis of a contemporary historical document which overlaps it in some ways with the subject matter of the play or the work of art itself. Now, Greenblatt himself has called this historical document, which he uses to analyze the work, he calls it the anecdote.

Now, the typical new historicist essay would omit the traditional and customary practice of referring to previous published interpretations of other place; that is how classic approaches to criticism used to be. And it discards this approach and instead begins the essay with a very powerful and dramatic anecdote. For example, let us look at this instance, where Louis Montrose writes on Shakespeare's midsummer night's dream and this is how he begins the essay.

I would like to recount an Elizabethan dream not Shakespeare's a midsummer night's dream, but one that was dreamt by Simon Foreman on the 23rd of January 1597 unquote. Now, as you can see this is a very dramatic opening and these dramatic openings often cite, the date and place and of that of the document itself as you can see a force of a very documentaries or eye witness account reporting of what is happening. This is meant to strongly evoke the quality of lived experiences, rather than just merely recorded history.

Now, since these historical documents, these anecdotes are not subordinated as context, but are rather analyzed in their own right which should perhaps call them a cotext rather than a context.

So, while classical historicists approaches would look at the historical context, new historicism, emphasizes on the existence of a cotext, rather than a context. The text and the cotext will be seen as expressions of the same historical moment of the same historical period of lived history and will be interpreted accordingly. Now, this process is very well described by Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton in the introduction to their collection of essays in new historicism and renaissance drama.

Let us go into what Dutton and Wilson give tell us in new historicism and renaissance drama. In this work, they point out how new historicism reads Shakespeare's plays as being embedded in other written texts, such as the penal records, the medical records and other colonial documents. Now, together all these texts comprise, what they call, what Wilson and Dutton call, the archival continue.

And what they represented was not the harmony, but the violence of the puritan attack on carnival, the imposition of slavery, the rise of patriarchy, etcetera, which was all symptomatic of what was happening in that period. This is a period that Foucault himself has called the age of confinement. Now, Wilson and Dutton outline the tone and ambitions of new historicism and the process of reading literature within the archival continuum itself is one of the key features of the new historical method.

When, we say that, new historicism involves the parallel study of literary and non literary texts text. The word parallel encapsulates all the essential differences between this and all the other previous approaches to literature, which had also perhaps made some use of the historical data. These earlier approaches made a hierarchical separation between the literary text, which was the object of value in the analysis and the historical background, which was merely the setting in which the work was to be read and therefore, by definition itself of much lesser worth.

Now, this very practice of giving equal weightage to the literary as well as the non literary material forms the first and foremost major difference between the new and old approaches to historicism. Let us now look at an example, a representative of the old historical method. We could perhaps look at works by E. M. Tillyard, whose a works like

Elizabethan world picture and Shakespeare's history plays, which were both published in 1943 and 44 respectively. Or, basically books against which the new historicism usually defines itself.

Now, this traditional approach to reading Shakespeare, which was perhaps and evident and active in circulation till about the 1970's. First characterize by the combination of this historical framework with the practice of a close reading and an analysis of various patterns of imagery, etcetera. Now, since for the new historicist, the events and the attitudes of the past now only exists solely as writing. It always makes sense to subject the writing of this kind to the close analysis, which was formally reserved only for reading a literary text.

Now, incorporated into this very preference for the textual record of the past is a strong influence of the practices of deconstruction. New historicism accepts a Derrida's views that there is nothing outside the text and in that special sense, everything that is available to us. Everything that tells us anything about the past is only available to us through textualized forms.

What this implies is that, what is available, what is available to us in a textualized form is in fact thrice process. It is first process through the ideology the outlook and the discourses of the times in which it was originally produced. Then, it has to go through the those very practices and discourses and outlooks and ideologies that is around us in our times and finally, it is mediated through the distorting web of language itself.

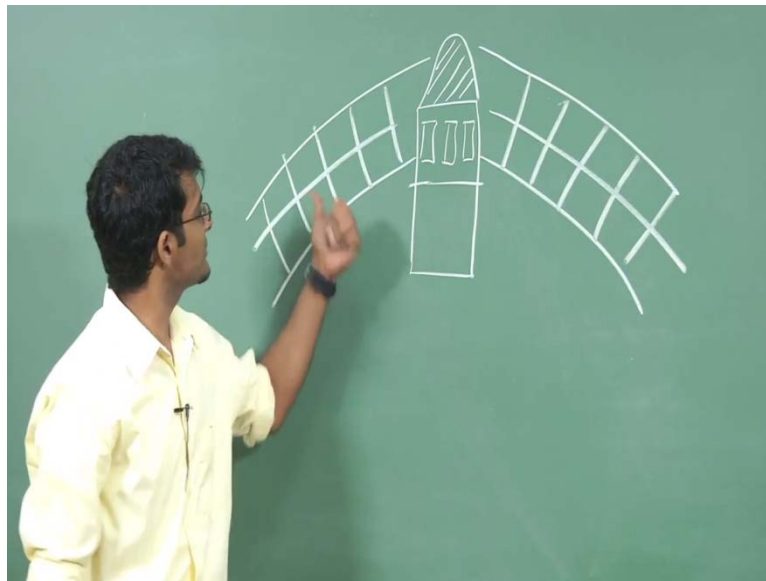
Therefore, whatever is presented in a the text is thereby remade and new historicists essays always constitute another remaking as the play or the poem, which is under discussion is juxtaposed within a chosen document. So, that a completely new entity is formed. In this sense, the objection that the documents that are selected may not be really relevant to the play is completely undermined and disarmed. Because, the aim is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new way of reality by resituating it; that is also one of the defining features of new historicism.

New historicism is also resolutely anti establishment and it is always implicitly on the side of liberal ideas of personal freedom and accepting and celebrating all forms of differences and deviance. And yet, new historicism is also can be seen as also something

that seems to lament the repressive power of the state, which it strongly feels can penetrate and influence any and every aspect of life.

This notion of the state as being all powerful and all seeing stems from the ideas of the post structuralist cultural historian Michel Foucault, whose pervasive image of the state is that of the panoptic, panoptic means all seeing pan optic surveillance.

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Now, what we see here in this representation is basically Foucault's own representation of what a panopticon would be. Now, this design is derived from the 18th century philosopher and the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, who originally conceived of this as a very viable design for a prison. Now, this you can imagine this picture of a panopticon prison as perhaps something that would resemble a stadium.

So, imagine that, this is the courtyard and this is a series of buildings that go around it, surround it and this comprises of a series of tied cells. These are all jail cells and the only thing that is monitoring this is this particular tower that you see right here in the middle. Now, this tower has a single warden and because, he has a 360 degree a view of everything that goes around in these cells. It becomes very effective way of monitoring and administering control, because all the prisoners who live in these cells, who surround this panoptic tower has no idea of really understanding.

If they are being watched or not and this is why, it is a successful this understood as a successful model for an even a contemporary modern day prison. So, even though the use of folds or physical interpretation might be used in a panoptic prison, the panoptic state; however, maintains this it is surveillance not by physical force or interpretation. But, by the power of it is discursive practices, which basically circulates the states own ideology throughout it is body politic.

And body politic of course, means the members of the state itself and that is how a panoptic state maintains it is surveillance. On the whole new historicism seems to emphasize this kind of this or this extends of a thought control with the implication that deviant thinking. May become literally unthinkable or for that matter, may become only just nearly thinkable.

Here, the state is seen as a monolithic structure and any prospects of change, becomes almost impossible. Now, Foucault's own work looks at the institutions which to be to enable this power to be maintained and he claims that this kind of the institutions. Such as state punishment mechanisms, such as prisons, the medical profession and legislation about sexuality, etcetera are entities that enable the states power to be maintained.

And with this, we see how there is a clear affinity between gramsci's notion of hegemony, which we looked at in the lecture on Marxist literary criticism. Althusser's notion of interpolation and Foucault's own discursive practices are all basically lie on similar terms. This is because, all of these concern, the way in which power is internalized by whom it disempowers, so that it does not have to be enforced constantly and externally.

In new historicism the interpretative weight placed upon a single document is often quite great and because of this very reason, the methods of new historicism are not greatly valid or admired by historians. It is on the contrary seen as a way of doing history, which has a strong appeal to non historians and not to historians in general. However, the appeal of new historicism is undoubtedly very great and for a variety of reasons, we will now discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the practices of new historicism.

First, although new historicism is founded upon post structuralist thinking, it is written in a far more accessible way for the most part avoiding a lot of the post structuralist characteristically dense style and vocabulary. For example, you might be aware of the

dense vocabulary and dense writing style; that is deployed by someone like Gayatri Spivak, who calls herself a Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist. Her language is often thought to be very opaque and you know very difficult to comprehend.

And this is something, this kind of language is something that the new historicist usually do not deploy, it is merely interested in presenting it is data and drawing, it is conclusions. And it is sometimes very easy to challenge the way this data is interpreted and this is partly because, know as in the case with a Sigmund Freud's on psychoanalytic theories, the empirical foundation on which the interpretation wrest is made openly available for scrutiny.

And the uncollected or the easy to read the paired down feel of the essays, which results from not sighting previous discussions of the literary work, gives them also a confess on it a very a stark and dramatic air. And it gives out the impression the feeling that new territories are being explode. Let us look at the practice of a new historicism itself. For instance, if for in wish to use the new historicists method for an essay about say a Shakespeare in comedy, one would start of by looking for suitable historical material or anecdotes. And having found this material, the format of the analysis would then be established.

For example, since Shakespeare's comedies are understood to be very domestic in it is theme and are often seen engaging with sexual mores, Korchips, relationships between men and women and many forms of intergenerational conflict, we interested in looking for material on the social and familial history from Shakespeare's on times. For instance, we would rely on perhaps a very well known and relevant book such as Lawrence Tones, the family sex and marriage in England between 1500 and 1800; this is a book that was published by penguin in 1979.

Now, this book offers chapters and insights into the reinforcement of patriarchy, the education of women, marriage, courtship, etcetera. And historical data and social history of this kind would provide a very accessible source of the cotexts for the new historical approach. Thus, we can see how new historicism offers a very hands on sought of experience as a practical approach to criticism.

And with that we end this module, we will come back and look at further examples of this approach and also look at how it differs from a very similar approach; that of new cultural materialism.

Thank you.