

## New Historicism, Cultural Studies (1980s-present)

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It's All Relative...

This school, influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist theories, seeks to reconnect a work with the time period in which it was produced and identify it with the cultural and political movements of the time (Michel Foucault's concept of *épistème*). New Historicism assumes that every work is a product of the historic moment that created it. Specifically, New Criticism is "...a practice that has developed out of contemporary theory, particularly the structuralist realization that all human systems are symbolic and subject to the rules of language, and the deconstructive realization that there is no way of positioning oneself as an observer outside the closed circle of textuality" (Richter 1205).

A helpful way of considering New Historical theory, Tyson explains, is to think about the retelling of history itself: "...questions asked by traditional historians and by new historicists are quite different...traditional historians ask, 'What happened?' and 'What does the event tell us about history?' In contrast, new historicists ask, 'How has the event been interpreted?' and 'What do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?'" (278). So New Historicism resists the notion that "...history is a series of events that have a linear, causal relationship: event A caused event B; event B caused event C; and so on" (Tyson 278).

New historicists do not believe that we can look at history objectively, but rather that we interpret events as products of our time and culture and that "...we don't have clear access to any but the most basic facts of history...our understanding of what such facts mean...is...strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact" (279). Moreover, New Historicism holds that we are hopelessly subjective interpreters of what we observe.

### Typical questions:

- \* What language/characters/events present in the work reflect the current events of the author's day?
- \* Are there words in the text that have changed their meaning from the time of the writing?
- \* How are such events interpreted and presented?
- \* How are events' interpretation and presentation a product of the culture of the author?
- \* Does the work's presentation support or condemn the event?
- \* Can it be seen to do both?
- \* How does this portrayal criticize the leading political figures or movements of the day?
- \* How does the literary text function as part of a continuum with other historical/cultural texts from the same period...?
- \* How can we use a literary work to "map" the interplay of both traditional and subversive discourses circulating in the culture in which that work emerged and/or the cultures in which the work has been interpreted?
- \* How does the work consider traditionally marginalized populations?

Here is a list of scholars we encourage you to explore to further your understanding of this theory:

- \* Michel Foucault - *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, 1970; *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, 1977
- \* Clifford Geertz - *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973; "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," 1992
- \* Hayden White - *Metahistory*, 1974; "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation," 1982
- \* Stephen Greenblatt - *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, 1980
- \* Pierre Bourdieu - *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 1977; *Homo Academicus*, 1984; *The Field of Cultural Production*, 1993

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