

WEEK 3

Texts & Contexts: New Criticism & New Historicism



Key Questions

- **What is the relationship between history and literature?**
- **Can we interpret texts meaningfully without context?**
- **What are potential problems of reading texts historically?**
- **What is New Historicism? What is New Criticism?**
- **How do they compare to liberal Humanism?**

Literature & History: What is Historical Context?

- Author: when was a text written/ published? What historical events and material, political and social conditions informed their writing?
- Text: what historical events and conditions does the text reference, either of its own time, or from the past? How are these aspects represented?
- Reader: what historical contexts and knowledge do readers bring to a text?

Literature & History: Critical Perspectives

(A) Literary texts are universal and transcend history; the historical context of their production and reception has no bearing on the literary work which is aesthetically autonomous, having its own laws, being a world unto itself

(B) The historical context of a literary work – the circumstances surrounding its production – is integral to a proper understanding of it: the text is produced within a specific historical context but in its literariness it remains separate from that context

(C) Historicism: literary works can help us to understand the time in which they are set – realist texts in particular provide imaginative representations of specific historical moments, events or periods; however, fictional texts are subordinate to historical records

(D) New Historicism: literary texts are bound up with other discourses and rhetorical structures; they are part of a history that is still being written

Liberal Humanism

- Literary classics and all literature of “value” is characterised by its “timelessness”
- Reflects aspects of human condition beyond specific historical periods or cultural contexts
- Value of a text is timeless; i.e. does not change as time goes on
- Problem: why do we value certain texts for different reasons now than several decades ago?
- Problem: are our views of texts really immune to historical, social and cultural change?

New Criticism

- Sees literary work as self-sufficient object that can only be properly interpreted in isolation
- Attention to specificity of language should tell reader all they need to know about text
- Focus lies on words on the page, not on contextual information (including history)
- Cf. Cleanth Brooks, “
- Problem: can we ever disregard our existing knowledge of a text’s historical context?
- Problem: can we see texts’ political significance + power if we ignore historical contexts and processes?

New Historicism: History as Text

- New historicists argue that literature can illuminate and is part of world outside the text:

1. “In place of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, new historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meanings, its effects, and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations.”

M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999), pp.182-183

- Sees texts as agents and makers of history

- History is textual: distinction between literature and history is artificial and flawed
- For New Historicists literature is history, and history is literature:

2. "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history"

Louis Montrose, "New Historicisms", *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992) pp. 392-417 (p. 410)

3. "By the very constitution of a set of events in such a way as to make a comprehensible story out of them, the historian charges those events with the symbolic significance of a comprehensible plot structure."

Hayden White, *Metahistory* (1978), pp. 91-92

- Historians as authors who employ literature and literary strategies to relate events
- New historicists contextualise literature within other cultural texts
- Diversity and disagreement within New Historicism and its practices
- Cultural Materialism as particular (and mainly British) mode of new historicist criticism (cf. Raymond Williams)

New Historicism in Practice: An (Obscene) Example

- New Historicism (and Cultural Materialism especially) also interested in context of literary production and consumption, and the ideologies that govern these acts
- Power structures and politics of who produces, circulates, polices, and consumes literature
- Example: nineteenth-century and mid-twentieth-century debates and laws on obscenity
- John Campbell, Lord Chief Justice 1850-1859, introduced Obscene Publications Act 1857
- Content alone proved difficult for the definition of obscene or pornographic material:

4. "The line which separated poisons from medicines was extremely difficult to define."

UK Parliament, 'Sale of Poisons and Poisonous Publications: Question', *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.145 (11 May 1857)

- Proposed bill for Obscene Publications Act met opposition due to fear that works with "genuine" artistic and literary merit would be destroyed under the new regulations:

5. "There was not a library in which books could not be found containing passages which a strict-dealing magistrate might consider to bring them within the operation of this Bill". Ibid.

6. "Works [of merit ... should be] preserved, not on account of the exceptional passages which were objectionable, but for the noble and elevating sentiments which they inculcated". Ibid.

- Instead of identifying obscene material by its content, it was defined by its audience
- Act allowed police to search premises for obscene publications intended for sale
- This meant the upper-class men could keep any obscene material in their libraries
- Concern were not expensive volumes that only the rich could afford, but cheap print publications that could be circulated among the working classes
- Concern not with consumption of pornography among educated, upper classes, for whom pornography was considered a valid object of study, but with "untutored" working classes
- To the untutored (that is, women, youths, and the working classes) pornography was supposedly poison

- In 1868, Hicklin rule further defined pornography by its ability to corrupt ...

7. "... those whose minds are open to immoral influences".

Jonathon Green and Nicholas J. Karolides, 'Hicklin Rule', *The Encyclopedia of Censorship* (New York: Facts on File, 2005) p.232

- Upper-class collectors thought of themselves and were widely considered as impervious to this material's corrupting potentials
- Henry Spencer Ashbee - the most famous Victorian collector of pornography - called himself a "truthful and honest historian" and likened his work to a physician's examination "of the naked body of a woman extended on the dissecting table" (*Bibliography of Forbidden Books*, p.xix and p.xx).
- Vizetelly prosecuted twice under Obscene Publications Act for selling English translations of Zola novels
- French editions presumed to be read by educated classes; English translation accessible to working classes
- Cf. D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and obscenity trials over republication in 1960

New Historicism: Summary of Key Aims

- To examine how literature contributes to, replicates, and/or challenges other cultural discourses, of the same or other periods
- To examine the implications and significance of the material production and consumption of literature (who is allowed/ able to produce and possess literature, who is allowed to circulate it, and to whom)