Once again, for Darlene, my best friend and loving wife, and
Heidi, my much loved daughter

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Cultural Poetics
or New Historicism

I had dreamed of speaking with the dead, and even now I do not abandon this dream. But the mistake was to imagine that I would hear a single voice, the voice of the other. If I wanted to hear one, I had to hear the many voices of the dead. And if I wanted to hear the voice of the other, I had to hear my own voice. The speech of the dead, like my own speech, is not private property.

Stephen Greenblatt, Shakespearean Negotiations, p. 20

INTRODUCTION

During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, New Criticism (see Chapter 3 and the Glossary) was the dominant approach to literary analysis. At this time, René Wellek and Austin Warren’s text Theory of Literature (1942) became the bible of hermeneutics, focusing the interpretive process on the text itself rather than on historical, authorial, or reader concerns.

A New-Critical Lecture

During this high tide of New Criticism, it would have been common to hear a college lecture like the following in a literature classroom.

Today, class, we will quickly review what we learned about Elizabethan beliefs from our last lecture so that we can apply this knowledge to our understanding of Act I of Shakespeare’s King Lear. As you remember, the Elizabethans believed in the interconnectedness of all life. Having created everything, God imposed on creation a cosmic order. At all costs, this cosmic order was not to be upset. Any element of the created universe that portended change, such as a violent storm, eclipses of the sun or moon, or even disobedient children within the family structure, suggested chaos that could possibly lead to anarchy and the destruction of the earth itself. Nothing, believed the Elizabethans, should break any link in this Great Chain of Being, the name given to this created cosmic order. With God and the angels in their place, with the King governing his obedient people in their places, and the
animals being subdued and utilized by humankind in theirs, all would be right in the world and operate as ordained by God.

Having gained an understanding of the Elizabethan worldview, let’s turn to Act I, Scene ii, lines 101–12 of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. You will recall that in this scene Edmund, the illegitimate son of the Duke of Gloucester, has persuaded the Duke that Edgar, the Duke’s legitimate son and heir to the dukedom, wants his father dead so that he may inherit the Duke’s title, lands, and wealth. Believing his natural son has betrayed both him and Edmund, Edgar’s half-brother, the Duke, says, “These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide.[...]”

What we see in these lines, class, is the Elizabethan worldview in operation. The Duke obviously believes in the interrelatedness of the created cosmic order and the concept of the Great Chain of Being. The significance of the eclipses of the sun and moon rests in their representing change and chaos. Because the Duke believes that the macrocosm (the universe) directly affects the microcosm (the world of humanity on earth), he blames these natural occurrences (the eclipses) for interfering in familial relationships and destroying love between brothers, between father and daughters, (King Lear having already banished his most beloved daughter, Cordelia), and between King and servant (Kent, King Lear’s loyal courtier also having being expelled from the kingdom).

Old Historicism

In the typical formalist lecture above, the professor’s method of literary analysis represents an example of both New Criticism and what is known today as the “old historicism.” In this methodology, history serves as a background to literature. Of primary importance is the text, the art object itself. The historical background of the text is only secondarily important, for it is the aesthetic object, the text, that mirrors the history of its times. The historical context serves only to shed light on the object of primary concern, the text.

Underlying this methodology is a view of history that declares that history, as written, is an accurate view of what really occurred. Such a view assumes that historians are able to write objectively about any given historical time period and, therefore, are able to state definitively the truth about that era. Through various means of historical analyses, historians are seemingly capable of discovering the mind-set, the worldview, or the beliefs of any group of people. For example, when the professor in our hypothetical lecture states the beliefs of the Elizabethans at the beginning of the lecture, he or she is articulating the Elizabethan worldview—the unified set of presuppositions or assumptions that all Elizabethans supposedly held concerning their world. By applying these assertions to the Elizabethan text *King Lear*,
the professor believes he or she can formulate a more accurate interpretation of the play than if the teacher did not know the play’s historical context.

The New Historicism

That historians can articulate a unified and internally consistent worldview of any given people, country, or time period and can reconstruct an accurate and objective picture of any historical event are key assumptions that Cultural Poetics challenges. Appearing as an alternate approach to textual interpretation in the 1970s and early 1980s, Cultural Poetics—often called New Historicism in America and Cultural Materialism in Great Britain—declares that all history is subjective, written by people whose personal biases affect their interpretation of the past. History, asserts Cultural Poetics, can never provide us with the truth or give us a totally accurate picture of past events nor the worldview of a group of people. Disavowing the old historicism’s autonomous view of history, Cultural Poetics declares that history is one of many discourses, or ways of seeing and thinking about the world. By highlighting and viewing history as one of many equally important discourses, such as sociology and politics, and by closely examining how all discourses (including that of textual analysis itself) effect a text’s interpretation, Cultural Poetics or New Historicism proclaims it provides its adherents with a practice of literary analysis that highlights the interrelatedness of all human activities, admits its own prejudices, and gives a more complete understanding of a text than does the old historicism and other interpretative approaches.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Although the assumptions of Cultural Poetics and its accompanying practices have been employed by critics for several decades, the beginning of New Historicism, the distinctively American form of this analysis, begins in the span 1979–1980 with the publication of several essays and texts, such as “Improvisation and Power” and Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980) by the Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt and a variety of works by Louis Montrose, Jonathan Dollimore, and others. Wishing to remain open to differing politics, theories, and ideologies, these critics share a similar set of concerns, not a codified theory or school of criticism. Of chief interest is their shared view that from the mid-1800s to the middle of the twentieth century, historical methods of literary analysis were erroneous. During this time, many scholars believed that history served as background information for textual analysis and that historians were able to objectively reproduce a given historical period and state “how it really was.” In disclaiming
these assumptions of "old historicism" and formulating its own theories of history and interpretative analysis, Cultural Poetics was first and aptly named New Historicism by one of its chief proponents, Stephen Greenblatt, in the introduction to a collection of Renaissance essays in a 1982 volume of the journal Genre. Because of its broader concerns with culture, history, literature, and a host of other factors that help determine a text's meaning, Greenblatt and his followers have come to believe that the term Cultural Poetics more aptly describes their approach to textual analysis than does New Historicism.

According to Stephen Greenblatt, Cultural Poetics was mostly shaped by the institutional character of American literary criticism during the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, one of the dominating influences in literary criticism was New Criticism, with its accompanying theoretical assumptions and practical methodology. For example, during Greenblatt’s graduate studies at Yale—a place he has since called the cathedral of High Church New Criticism—Greenblatt himself mastered New Critical principles. New Critical scholars, writers, and critics like T. S. Eliot, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ranson, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren were revered, and their methodology widely practiced throughout the country.

Aided early on in its development by the publication and wide use of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s textbook Understanding Poetry (1939), New Criticism presented scholars and teachers a workable and teachable methodology for interpreting texts. From a theoretical perspective, New Criticism regards a literary text as an artifact or object with an existence of its own, independent of and not necessarily related to its author, its readers, the historical time it depicts, or the historical period in which it was written. From this viewpoint, a text’s meaning emerges when readers scrutinize it and it alone. Such a close scrutiny will result, the New Critics maintain, in perceiving a text as an organic whole, wherein all of its parts fit together and support one overarching theme. A literary text is highly structured and contains its meaning in itself; it will reveal that meaning to a critic-reader who examines it on its own terms by applying a rigorous and systematic methodology. Such an analysis, say the New Critics, is particularly rewarding, for literature offers us a unique kind of knowledge that presents us with the deepest truths related to humanity, truths that science is unable to disclose.

What New Criticism did not provide for Greenblatt and other critics was an attempt to understand literature from a historical perspective. In a New Critical analysis, the text was what mattered, not its historical context. Considerations that any given text may be the result of historical phenomena were devalued or silenced. In addition, Greenblatt felt that questions about the nature and definition of literature were not encouraged. He and other critics wanted to discuss how literature was formed, whose interest it serves, and what the term literature really means. Do contemporary issues
...and the cultural milieu of the times operate together to create literature, they wondered, or is literature simply an art form that will always be with us?

Cultural Poetics, then, began to develop as a direct result of New Criticism's dominance of literary criticism and its response or lack thereof to questions concerning the nature, the definition, and the function of literature itself. At the same time that Greenblatt was asking a different set of literary questions, a variety of new critical theories and theorists appeared on the literary scene. Deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis also began to challenge the assumptions of New Criticism. Rejecting New Criticism's claim that the meaning of a text can be found, for the most part, in the text alone, these poststructural theories had been developing a variety of theoretical positions about the nature of the reading process, the part the reader plays in that process, and the definition of a text or the actual work of art. It is among this cacophony of voices that Cultural Poetics arose.

After reading sociological and cultural studies authored by Michel Foucault, Greenblatt and other critics admired and emulated Foucault's tireless questioning of the nature of literature, history, culture, and society. Like Foucault, they refused to accept the traditional, well-worn answers. From the Marxist scholars—Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Raymond Williams, and others—they learned that history is shaped by the people who live it, and they accepted the Marxist idea of the interconnectedness of all life. What we do with our hands and how we make our money does indeed, they believed, affect how and what we think.

But unlike many of the poststructuralist theories—especially deconstruction—Cultural Poetics struggled to find a way out of undecidability, or aporia, about the nature of reality and the interpretation of a text. While not denying that many factors affect the writing, the production, and the publication of texts, New Historicists sought to move beyond undecidability rather than simply assert that a text has many possible meanings. In so doing, they challenged the assumptions of the old historicism, which presupposed historians could actually write an objective history of any situation; they redefined the meaning of a text; and they asserted that all critics must acknowledge and openly declare their own biases.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, critics such as Catherine Gallagher, Jonathan Dollimore, Jerome McGann, Stephen Greenblatt, and others have voiced their concerns that the study of literature and its relationship to history has been too narrow. Viewing a text as culture in action, these critics blur the distinction between an artistic production and any other kind of social production or event. They want us to see that the publication of Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is a political act, while noting that the ceremonies surrounding the inauguration of a United States president is an aesthetic event, with all the trappings of symbolism and structure found in any poem. Many
similar examples that highlight their critical practices can be found in their chief public voice, the journal *Representations*.

It would be an invalid assumption, however, to think that consensus can be found among those who espouse the theory and practice of Cultural Poetics about theories of art, terminology, and practical methods of interpretation. Cultural Poetics, like all other approaches to literary analysis, is best understood as a practice of literary interpretation that is still in process, one that is continually redefining and fine-tuning its purposes, its philosophy, and its practices while, at the same time, gaining new followers. Presently, its followers can be divided into two main branches: Cultural Materialism and New Historicism. Members of either group continue to call for a reawakening of our historical consciousness, declare that history and literature must be seen as disciplines to be analyzed together, place all texts in their appropriate contexts, and believe that while we are researching and learning about different societies that provide the historical context for various texts, we are simultaneously learning about ourselves, our own habits, and our own beliefs.

**Cultural Materialism**

Cultural Materialism, the British branch of Cultural Poetics, is openly Marxist in its theories and overtly political and cultural in its aims. It finds its ideological roots in the writings of the Marxist critics Louis Althusser and Raymond Williams. Believing that literature can serve as an agent of change in today’s world, cultural materialists declare that any culture’s hegemony is basically unstable. For literature to produce change, a critic must read the works of the established canon “against the grain.” By so doing, the critic will expose the political unconscious of the text and help debunk the social and political myths created by the bourgeoisie.

**New Historicism**

The American branch of Cultural Poetics is frequently called New Historicism, as discussed in the “Historical Development” section. Its founder, Stephen Greenblatt, along with a host of other scholars holds that one’s culture permeates both texts and critics. As all of society is intricately interwoven, so are critics and texts, both to each other and in the culture in which the critics live and the texts are produced. Since all critics are influenced by the culture in which they live, New Historicists believe that they cannot escape public and private cultural influences. Each critic will therefore arrive at a unique interpretation of a text. Less overtly political than its British counterpart, New Historicism continues to be refined and redefined by its many practitioners.

**ASSUMPTIONS**

Like other poststructuralist approaches, Cultural Poetics disavows the long-held belief that literature contains all elements necessary for literary analysis. Disavowing the “old ideal” of a unified historical context—that literature possesses all the philosophical and practical information required for literary analysis—Cultural Poetics posits a complex interconnectedness between history, while simultaneously restructuring history. Unlike the older approach, no one connection exists between historical texts and society, while deconstructing the cultural context. We may be the author, or the historical author, of the historical documents exhibited in this text. A new approach to texts helps us arrive at meaning for a long-held tradition, or...

**Michel Foucault**

Cultural Poetics finds a number of assumptions in the work of the philosopher, historian, and psychiatrist Michel Foucault. The Frenchman begins his rather complex approach by redefining the concept of history. Foucault declares that history is anything, a middle, and modern. Instead of purposefully going for interpretation, or explained as a series of causes and effects, or destiny or all-powerful philosophical ideas, we need to ask how these discourses are organized. Rather, the inferences of the modern Foucault calls the traditional period in history development as a discursive reality (or what it deemed acceptable standards of behavior that seems good or bad, ...
ASSUMPTIONS

Like other poststructuralist practices, Cultural Poetics begins by challenging the long-held belief that a text is an autonomous work of art that contains all elements necessary to arrive at a supposedly correct interpretation. Disavowing the "old historical" assumption that a text simply reflects its historical context—the mimetic view of art and history—and that such historical information provides an interesting and sometimes useful backdrop for literary analysis, Cultural Poetics redirects our attention to a series of philosophical and practical concerns that it believes will highlight the complex interconnectedness of all human activities. It redefines both a text and history while simultaneously redefining the relationship between a text and history. Unlike the old historicism, New Historicism asserts that an intricate connection exists between an aesthetic object—a text or any work of art—and society, while denying that a text can be evaluated in isolation from its cultural context. We must know, it declares, the societal concerns of the author, of the historical times evidenced in the work, and of other cultural elements exhibited in the text before we can devise a valid interpretation. This new approach to textual analysis questions the very act of how we can arrive at meaning for any human activity, whether it is a text, a social event, a long-held tradition, or a political act.

Michel Foucault

Cultural Poetics finds the basis for its concerns as well as a coherent body of assumptions in the writings of the twentieth-century French archaeologist, historian, and philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Foucault begins his rather complex and sometimes paradoxical theoretical structure by redefining the concept of history. Unlike many past historians, Foucault declares that history is not linear—it does not have a definite beginning, a middle, and an end—nor is it necessarily teleological, that is, purposefully going forward toward some known end. Nor can history be explained as a series of causes and effects controlled by some mysterious destiny or an all-powerful deity. For Foucault, history is the complex interrelationship of a variety of discourses, the various ways—artistic, social, political, and so on—that people think and talk about their world. How these discourses interact in any given historical period is not random. Rather, the interaction is dependent on a unifying principle or pattern Foucault calls the episteme: Through language and thought, each period in history develops its own perceptions concerning the nature of reality (or what it defines as truth), sets up its own acceptable and unacceptably standards of behavior, establishes its criteria for judging what it deems good or bad, and certifies what group of people articulate, protect,
and defend the yardstick whereby all established truths, values, and actions will be deemed acceptable.

To unearth the episteme of any given historical period, Foucault borrows techniques and terminology from archaeology. Just as an archaeologist must slowly and meticulously dig through various layers of earth to uncover the symbolic treasures of the past, historians must expose each layer of discourse that comes together to shape a people’s episteme. And just as an archaeologist must date each finding and then piece together the artifacts that define and help explain that culture, so must the historian piece together the various discourses and their interconnections among themselves and with nondiscursive practices—any cultural institution such as a form of government, for example—that will assist in articulating the episteme under investigation.

Seen from this point of view, history is a form of power. Since each era or people develop their own episteme, it is, in actuality, the episteme that controls how that era or group of people will view reality. History becomes the study and unearthing of a vast, complex web of interconnecting forces that ultimately determines what takes place in each culture or society.

Why or how epistemes change from one historical period to another is basically unclear. That they change seemingly without warning is certain. Such a change occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century—the shift from the Age of Reason to romanticism, for example—and initiated a new episteme. In this new historical era, different relationships develop among discourses that had not previously evolved or had existed and were deemed unacceptable in the previous historical period. Foucault asserts that the abrupt and often radical changes that cause breaks from one episteme to another are neither good nor bad, valid nor invalid. Like the discourses that help produce them, different epistemes exist in their own right; they are neither moral or immoral, but amoral.

Historians must realize, according to Foucault, that they are influenced and prejudiced by the episteme(s) in which they live. Since their thoughts, customs, habits, and other actions are colored by their epistememes, historians must realize that they can never be totally objective about their own or any other historical period. To be a historian, Foucault asserts, means one must be able to confront and articulate one’s own set of biases before examining the various discourses or the material evidence of past events that comprise an episteme of any given period. Such an archaeological examination of the various discourses, Foucault believes, will not unearth a monological view of an episteme (that is, one that presupposes a single, overarching, political vision or design), but a set of inconsistent, irregular, and often contradictory discourses that will explain the development of that episteme, including which elements were accepted, changed, or rejected to form the “truth” and set the acceptable standards for that era.
Clifford Geertz

In addition to borrowing many of its ideas from Foucault, Cultural Poetics also utilizes theories and methodologies from the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz believes that there exists "no human nature independent of culture," culture being defined by Geertz as "a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions," for governing behavior. Each person must be viewed as a cultural artifact. How each person views society is always unique, for there exists what Geertz call an "information gap" between what our body tells us and what we have to know in order to function in society. This gap also exists in society because society cannot know everything that happens among all its people. Like individuals, society simply fills in the gaps with what it assumes to have taken place. And it is this information gap, both within people and society, that results in the subjectivity of history.

Cultural Poetics also borrows and adapts Geertz's anthropological methodology for describing culture as thick description. Coined by Geertz, Geertz uses this term to describe the seemingly insignificant details present in any cultural practice. By focusing on these details, one can then reveal the inherent contradictory forces at work within a culture. Borrowing this idea from Geertz, Cultural Poetics theorists declare that each separate discourse of a culture must be uncovered and analyzed in hopes of showing how all discourses interact with each other and with institutions, peoples, and other elements of culture. It is the interaction among the many different discourses which shapes a culture and interconnects all human activities, including the writing, reading, and interpretation of a text that the Cultural Poetics critic wishes to emphasize.

Texts, History, and Interpretation

Since texts are simply one of many elements that help shape a culture, Cultural Poetics critics believe that all texts are really social documents that reflect but also, and more importantly, respond to their historical situation. Also, since any historical situation is an intricate web of oftentimes competing discourses, Cultural Poetics scholars necessarily center history and declare that any interpretation of a text would be incomplete if we do not consider the text's relationship to the discourses that helped fashion it and to which the text is a response. From this point of view, a text becomes a battleground of competing ideas among the author, society, customs, institutions, and social practices that are all eventually negotiated by the author and the reader and influenced by each contributor's episteme. By allowing history a prominent place in the interpretative process, and by examining the various
convoluted webs that interconnect the discourses found within a text and in its historical setting, we can negotiate a text’s meaning.

Overall, Cultural Poetics posits the interconnectedness of all our actions. For a Cultural Poetics critic, everything we do is interrelated to and within a network of practices embedded in our culture. No act is insignificant; everything is important. In our search to attach meaning to our actions, Cultural Poetics critics believe that we can never be fully objective, for we are all biased by cultural forces. Only by examining the complex lattice-work of these interlocking forces or discourses that empower and shape culture, and by realizing that no single discourse reveals the pathway to absolute truth about ourselves or our world, can we begin to interpret either our world or a text.

In Cultural Poetics theory, the goal of interpretative analysis is really the formation and an understanding of a “poetics of culture,” a process that sees life and its sundry activities as something more like art than we think, certainly a more metaphorical interpretation of reality than an analytic one. Through the practice of their analysis, Cultural Poetics critics maintain that we will discover not only the social world of the text but also the present-day social forces working upon us as we negotiate meaning with printed material. Like history itself, our interaction with any text is a dynamic, ongoing process that will always be somewhat incomplete.

**METHODOLOGY**

Like other approaches to literary analysis, Cultural Poetics includes an array of techniques and strategies in its interpretative inquiries with no one method being dubbed the correct form of investigation. No matter what the technique, Cultural Poetics scholars begin by assuming that language shapes and is shaped by the culture that uses it. By language, Cultural Poetics critics mean much more than spoken words. For them, language includes discourse, writing, literature, social actions, and any social relationship whereby a person or a group impose their ideas or actions upon another.

Included in this definition of language is history. Like literature, writing, or other relationships that involve either a transfer or some other relationship of power, history now becomes a narrative discourse. As in literature or any other narrative discourse, history must now be viewed as a language that can never be fully articulated or completely explained. From this perspective, history and literature are nearly synonymous terms, both being narrative discourses that interact with their historical situations, their authors, their readers, and their present-day cultures. Neither can claim a
complete or an objective understanding of its content or historical situation, for, in fact, both are ongoing conversations with their creators, readers, and cultures.

Since Cultural Poetics critics view history, literature, and other social activities as forms of discourse, they strongly reject the old historicism, which sees history as necessary background material for the study of literature. Cultural Poetics critics view a work of art, a text, as they would any other social discourse that interacts with its culture to produce meaning. No longer is one discourse superior to another, but all are necessary components that shape and are shaped by society. No longer do clear lines of distinction exist among literature, history, literary criticism, anthropology, art, the sciences, and other disciplines. Blurring the boundaries between disciplines, Cultural Poetics scholars investigate all discourses that effect any social production. Since they believe that meaning evolves from the interaction of the variously interwoven social discourses, no hierarchy of discourses can exist; all discourses are necessary and must be investigated in the process of textual analysis. The interpretative process, then, must also include questions about the methodological assumptions for discerning meaning for each discourse and for every practitioner, for no one discourse or method or critic can reveal the truth about any social production in isolation from other discourses.

Since Cultural Poetics critics view an aesthetic work as a social production, for them a text's meaning resides in the cultural system composed of the interlocking discourses of its author, the text, and its reader. To unlock textual meaning, a Cultural Poetics critic investigates three areas of concern: the life of the author, the social rules and dictates found within a text, and a reflection of a work's historical situation as evidenced in the text. Since an actual person authors a text, his or her actions and beliefs reflect both individual concerns and those of the author's society and are essential elements of the text itself. In addition, the standard of behavior as reflected in a society's rules of decorum must also be investigated because these behavioral codes simultaneously helped shape and were shaped by the text. The text must also be viewed as an artistic work that reflects on these behavioral social codes. To begin to understand a text's significance and to realize the complex social structure of which it is a part, Cultural Poetics critics declare that all three areas of concern must be investigated. If one area is ignored, the risk of returning to the old historicism, with its lack of understanding about a text as a social production, is great. During the process of textual analysis, critics must not forget to question their individual assumptions and methods as well, for they too are products of and act as shaping influences upon their culture.

To avoid the old historicism's error of thinking that each historical period evidences a single, political worldview, Cultural Poetics avoids sweep-
ing generalizations and seeks the seemingly insignificant details and manifestations of culture frequently ignored by most historians or literary critics. Because Cultural Poetics views history and literature as social discourses and therefore battlegrounds for conflicting beliefs, actions, and customs, a text becomes "culture in action." By highlighting seemingly insignificant happenings, such as a note written by Thomas Jefferson to one of his slaves or a sentence etched on a window pane by Hawthorne, these critics hope to bring to the surface those competing social codes and forces that mold a given society. Emphasizing a particular moment or incident rather than an overarching vision of society, a Cultural Poetics critic will often point out nonconventional connections: for example, between Sophia Hawthorne's having a headache after reading The Scarlet Letter and the ending of Nathaniel Hawthorne's next romance, The House of the Seven Gables, or between the climate and environs of Elmira, New York, and some locations, descriptions, and actions in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Cultural Poetics scholars believe that an investigation into these and similar happenings will demonstrate the complex relationship that exists among all discourses and show how narrative discourses such as history, literature, and other social productions interact with, define, and are in turn shaped by their culture. What we will learn by applying these principles and methodologies, say the Cultural Poetics critics, is that there is not one voice but many voices to be heard interpreting texts and our culture: our own, the voices of others, the voices of the past, the voices of the present, and the voices that will be in the future.

QUESTIONS FOR TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

When analyzing any text from a Cultural Poetics point of view, Stephen Greenblatt suggests we ask and investigate the following questions:

- What kinds of behavior, what 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 are the larger social structures with which these particular acts of praise or blame might be connected?
QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

• Read the Tony Harrison poem "Marked with a D." and ask yourself what voices you hear in the poem. What is the text saying about its culture? About its readers? About itself?

• After reading Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand," see if you can discover any propaganda in the story. What was Hawthorne's position concerning the nature of sin? Of Puritan theology? Of the concept of forgiveness?

• Does Cultural Poetics ask us to make any connections between the 1840s and the 1640s? If so, what are these connections?

• How does Hawthorne's "The Maypole of Merry Mount" question dominant cultural values of Hawthorne's day? Of the 1640s?

• What is a working definition of the word sin as used in our present culture? In Hawthorne's day? In the 1640s? Why would Cultural Poetics be interested in this definition?

• How is our reading of both "Marked with a D." and "Ethan Brand" shaped by our history? Our understanding of our history?

• Identify four discourses operating in "The Maypole of Merry Mount" and "Marked with a D." Show how these discourses interconnect to enable the reader to arrive at an interpretation of each of the works.

• Examine the student essay written at the end of Chapter 9, "Marxism." Describe the student's hegemony on the basis of this essay. Provide evidence to support your answer.

SAMPLE ESSAY

In the student essay that ends this chapter, entitled "Hawthorne's Understanding of History in 'The Maypole of Merry Mount,'" be able to show how or whether the critic investigates the three major areas of concern for Cultural Poetics. Is one area emphasized more than another? Does the author highlight a historical moment or a culture's single vision of reality? Does the critic admit his own prejudices and methodology? Is history used as background or brought to the center of the literary analysis? What would be different about this essay if it were written from the old historicism's point of view?

FURTHER READING


WEB SITES FOR EXPLORATION

www.sou.edu/English/Hedges/Sodashop/RCenter/Theory/Explaind/nhistexp.htm

A good review of the principles and theories of New Historicism

www.chosun.ac.kr/~mgoh/crit/structuralism/newhistoricism.htm

Another good review of New Historicism's basic principles

ww.cnr.edu/home/bmcmnanus/newhistoricism.html

Provides links for new sites and includes a discussion of the theory of Michel Foucault

www.nyu.edu/classes/stephesn/Greenblat%20page.htm

A discussion of Stephen Greenblatt and his relationship to New Historicism
Hawthorne's Understanding of History
in "The Maypole of Merry Mount"

Synonymous with the flowering of American literature during the
1840s and 1850s is the name Nathaniel Hawthorne. Known particularly for
his four romances—The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, The
Blithedale Romance, and The Marble Faun—Hawthorne also penned over
sixty short stories, including "The Maypole of Merry Mount" (c. 1829).
Based upon an actual event occurring at Mount Wollaston or Merry Mount
between the fun-loving, anti-Puritan Thomas Morton and the Puritan
leader William Bradford, this tale presents a mirthful scene suddenly
brought to a close by the arrival of the staunch Puritans.

More frequently than not scholars, such as Richard Harter Fogle, Ran-
dall Stewart, John T. Frederick, and many others, note that Hawthorne
paints the revelers of Merry Mount as "immitigable zealot[s]," whereas the
Puritans are "most dismal wretches." Put another way, Hawthorne embod-
ies in the conflict between Merry Mount and Plymouth two distinct person-
ality types: the jolly colonists versus the gloomy Puritans. That his sympa-
thies reside with the Lord and Lady of the May are undoubtable, but if he
were forced to choose between the rivaling parties, Hawthorne would have
sided with Endicott, for life, after all, is not a party but a rather serious af-
fair. His story, assert Hawthorian scholars, demonstrates that the Puritan
worldview, with its accompanying assumptions about the nature of reality,
triumphs over the colonists because the Puritans, not the fun-loving revel-
ers, are in tune with the nature of reality itself.

Such an interpretation rests upon the standards set by the old histori-
cism. Yes, Hawthorne was a historian, and he did understand Puritan theol-
ogy and history. But the history Hawthorne understood was itself a narra-
tive written by historians who can at best only present their own personal
and biased understanding of the past. From a New Historicist's point of
view, there exists no definitive view of the Puritans, no definitive view of
Hawthorne, and no definitive understanding of "The Maypole of Merry
Mount." What we can gain from rereading this tale from a New Historicist
viewpoint is a glimpse of how Hawthorne saw life in early America and
how he himself was shaped by his own historical era. Such an understand-
ing will reveal how seemingly insignificant events in Hawthorne's life and