

Critical Approach: New Historicism

New Historicism Occurred in Response to:

- “New” Criticism’s tendency to treat works of literature in a historical vacuum, as if a poem or novel had no relation to its historical context whatsoever.
- Political developments in the 1960s, especially a desire on the part of literature professors to figure out how understanding literature might help in understanding social problems.
- An influx of Continental professors and literary theories into Britain and the United States.
- Large numbers of literature professors being trained who came from backgrounds (female, working class, Italian-American, African-American, and, increasingly, Asian American and Latino American) not previously represented at the PhD level.

New Historicist Premises:

- Images and narratives do important *cultural work*. They function as a kind of workshop (or playroom) where cultural problems, hopes, and obsessions are addressed or avoided.
- Consequently, New Historicists argue that the best framework for interpreting literature is to place it in its historical context: what contemporaneous issues, anxieties, and struggles does the work of literature reflect, refract, or try to work through?
- New Historicist criticism tries to relate interpretive problems (such as why Hamlet doesn’t kill Claudius as he prays) to cultural-historical problems (such as contemporaneous debates about purgatory, transubstantiation, and salvation, as well as anxieties about what constituted legitimacy in the church, the monarchy, and succession to the throne).
- New Historicists also tend to stress that authors and poets are not secular saints--that even though they may be more circumspect about their societies than the average citizen, they nonetheless participate in it. Consequently, New Historicist critics often point out places in artists’ work where their attitudes do not anticipate our own, or may even be distasteful to us.

Complaints Sometimes Made About New Historicism:

- That it tends to reduce literature to a footnote of history, and neglects the uniquely literary qualities of the work in question.
- Frederick Jameson argues that much New Historicist criticism lacks a *theory* of history. That history, to paraphrase the bumpersticker, “just happens,” without explaining why it happens in the way that it does and who is effected.

- At its worst, New Historicism's emphasis on connecting literature to politics can resemble what Eve Sedgwick calls "good dog/ bad dog" criticism, where critics praise artists for their progressive views and chastise them for reactionary ones, instead of accepting that culture's have problems, those problems are complicated, and we can learn from how artists tried to grapple with those problems without giving them a grade card.

Important New Historicist Critics and Trends

Steven Greenblatt has been the guiding force in New Historicist criticism, and since he writes in the field of Renaissance studies, that was the first period to generate lots of New Historicist criticism. It has since become important in criticism of Medieval, and nineteenth century British and American literature, and is working it's way through criticism of modernist literature and eighteenth century literature. Post-modernism, by its very nature, tends to have identifiable, but often obscure connections to contemporary history, challenging new historicist critics to be extremely sophisticated about how history is represented in a postmodernist work.