English 123—Yanover

Cultural Criticism: New Historicism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of New Historicism:
New Historicism examines how a text reflects and comments on its context as well as how its context informs or adds to our understanding of the text’s meaning and purpose. Context refers to both biographical information about the author, including his or her background as well as social, political, economic situations or issues, etc., the author was aware of, interested in, or affected by, and information about the text’s setting, both the time and place depicted in the text as well as the time and place in which it was written, which often but not always are one and the same. (Some New Historicism critics also consider the context of audiences in subsequent eras, considering how the meaning and purpose of the text as well as the response to it can change with the context. In this way, New Historicism overlaps with Reader-Response Criticism.)

New Historicism, belonging to Cultural Criticism and informed by Feminist and Marxist Criticism as well as Deconstruction, rejects the possibility of absolute truth or unified meaning. New Historicism, unlike traditional Historicism, thus does not concern itself with proving that events in the texts really did happen or people in them really did exist. Instead, it questions whose stories get told and whose voices get heard and conversely whose are silenced in the existing narratives and to what effect.

Unlike New Criticism, Deconstruction, and Reader-Response Criticism, New Historicism requires research and comes with the obligation to avoid plagiarism by adhering to MLA style practices, including careful, correct, and consistent use of parenthetical in-text citation and a matching complete and correct Works Cited page for all sources, whether paraphrasing, summarizing, or quoting them. (Note: When using primary sources, it is necessary to provide correct and consistent in-text citation; however, a Works Cited page is not required in this course.) In addition, research requires careful selection and evaluation of secondary sources (Wikipedia or study guides like SparkNotes are never appropriate) to ensure that the sources are credible, reliable, and legitimate. Just as legitimate sources support and strengthen your argument and credibility, inappropriate sources damage and weaken your argument and credibility.

Even though New Historicism uses research, the research is not instead of close reading/analysis and interpretation of the text but in service to that analysis/interpretation. Thus, the research is not the focus or emphasis of the essay and is not separate from your analysis/argument but integrated into it, used to set up the argument in the introduction and/or to support the argument in the body. Ultimately, the purpose is not simply to report the historical or biographical information but to use it to uncover and understand the text’s meaning and purpose and to prove and deepen your argument about it. In addition, it is not enough for your argument to focus on and prove that the text really is about a particular historical situation or person (though you do need to prove any correspondence you claim); instead, it needs to prove and explain what that correspondence reveals about the meaning and purpose of the text.

Final note:
The claim of your New Historicism response paper or essay will focus on a single specific, unified argument about the text’s meaning and/or purpose, which is either revealed by or supported by the research.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of New Historicism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:
AN OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL STUDIES

Part of the difficulty in defining cultural studies, or even culture for that matter, is that the terms are so inclusive. If culture refers to the sum of the beliefs, institutions, arts, and behaviors of a particular people or time, then cultural studies can be said to address an almost unthinkably broad body of knowledge: language, customs, legal systems, literature, and more. Sometimes such a study is even interested in the culture of those who have responded to it. As it usually proceeds, however, a cultural study will address a particular topic, such as “Hispanic Women Writers of Texas,” using the cultural context to arrive at generalizations about that topic. The intent is to connect historical, social, and economic knowledge surrounding the topic, a topic that may not seem to be very literary at all. Because any context is virtually unending, the critic never knows enough. As a result, interpretations made from a cultural studies perspective tend to be open-ended and continue to evolve as they are affected by new information. Nevertheless, a few generalizations can be made.

For the most part, groups engaged in cultural studies share the assumption that within any society there is a dominant group that determines what is acceptable and what is unacceptable for the larger body. It defines the culture’s tastes and values—in short, its ideology. Cultural critics are interested in those groups of people who do not belong to the dominant parties and who challenge the hegemony of the powerful. In the world of literature, they are the people Antonio Gramsci called subaltern writers. However, wherever there is dominance, there is also, to some degree, defiance that makes it impossible for the powerful to prevent change indefinitely. Recognizing that subjects (people) are socially constructed, cultural critics work to change power structures where they are unequal, making the subjugated and marginalized more visible and influential makers of the culture. As James Berlin put it, “The subject is the point of intersection of various discourses—discourses about class, race, gender, ethnicity, age, religion, and the like—and it is influenced by those discourses.” Consequently, it is necessary to examine signifying practices in the formation of subjectivities within concrete material, social, and political conditions. Such a focus makes the field a highly politicized one, dedicated, as it is, to examining cultural forces in both literature and life with the intent of changing the way power is conceived.

New Literary Historicism

Not surprisingly, such radical departures from the traditional ways of looking at history change the way we read literature. In fact, it should be noted that most of the new historicists are literary scholars. Under their siege, the concept that a text imitates life—that it reflects its historical context—has either disappeared or seems serious changes. Gone are those approaches that used history, even history of the text, as background to literature and that saw the work as a replication of a period’s people and behavior (see Chapter 2). History is not expected to validate a text by providing facts that will prove the text’s truth. Indeed, history cannot do so. Because it has been subjectively rendered, the facts are not, and have never been, known with certainty.

The new historicist critic works in two directions. He or she seeks to understand a text by examining its cultural context—the anxieties, issues, struggles, politics (and more) of the era in which it was created. She also seeks to understand the culture by looking at its literature. Even a work that is not overtly political or ideological affects the culture that reads it and is in turn affected by that culture; the two are intimately bound up with each other, making it impossible to read a text in isolation. In particular, the new historicist critic is interested in understanding a culture’s power structure. She may even try to explain one incident in a text in terms of the concerns of the period in which it was written. When dealing with a contemporary work, however, the critic may not be content with simply understanding the power structure. Instead, she may see a text as an instrument of political awareness and a statement of ideology. Critics who work from this perspective often want to change the culture, and the stories they bring to light are deemed to be tools for modifying it. Like the Marxists who preceded them, these critics assume that literature addresses cultural concerns and can affect society’s attitudes and values.

With such revised assumptions, the questions for readers are not “Were the characters based on real people?” or “Do the events recounted in the text recreate experiences from the author’s life?” or “Does the text capture the spirit of the times accurately?” Rather, the question is “How does the text reveal and comment on the disparate discourses of the culture it depicts?” With that new question, history moves from behind a literary work, and an era’s various discourses, one of them being literature, become coparticipants in a complex interaction that is the subject of study. Just as the historian contextualizes historical texts in the many discourses of a culture, so the critic interprets literary texts by viewing them as part of the same interchange. A work of literature is no longer read as an autonomous entity.
An analysis that seeks to examine the world of the author and the text often begins with questions such as these:

- What assumptions did people hold about their lives and their culture during the author's lifetime?
- What traditional practices were being challenged?
- Who wielded power at the time the work was produced? Who wielded power during the period the work depicts?
- What shaping experiences in the author's life were unique to him or her?
- How did political and social events impact the writer's attitudes and choices?

Sometimes an author's intent is clearly evident in the work itself, but on other occasions, the critic must resort to finding interviews or book reviews to determine the purposes behind it. Such is almost always the case when one is interested in knowing how a work has been received since publication. These searches involve questions such as the following:

- What are the author's stated political views?
- Has the writer ever spoken publicly for or against some cause?
- Can one character be assumed to be speaking for the author?
- Was the work an immediate success, or was it largely overlooked upon publication?
- Did the work cause controversy when it was published?
- Has the work sustained its readership since it first appeared?

**WRITING A NEW HISTORICIST LITERARY ANALYSIS**

Throughout your analysis, and as you begin to shape it into a written report, you will hold certain assumptions about the text. You will assume that it has been marked by the time and place in which it was produced and that it reflects the time and place in which it is set. You will also assume that the text serves some purpose, even if the author and perhaps the reader are not consciously aware of what that intention is. In addition, you will accept that the reading you are making will be different from those of other readers, leading to multiple interpretations that are affected by changing cultural movements and evolving understandings of the time and place of production.

**Prewriting**

In the case of a new historicist analysis, prewriting may not be an accurate name for what you are likely to do. Because your attention will be on all the cultural forces surrounding (and infusing) the text with meaning, you will need to be well informed on a number of issues that lie outside it. Consequently, instead of prewriting, you may be prereading. To acquire a comprehensive understanding of the cultural environment—to engage in thick description—you will probably need to do some library work, looking for information in the following areas:

- The author. Reading a biography can provide insight into the writer's concerns about personal experiences as well as about society in general. Such interests will affect the presentation of the people and times depicted in the text, whether or not the setting is the same as the one in which the author is working.

- The cultural moment. Not only will newspapers and magazines of the era report the issues of the day, but less explicitly they will also indicate the people's tastes. That is, they will provide information about the rules governing what was deemed to be acceptable and desirable at that time. The issues and the tastes of the day are forces, albeit nonliterary ones, that impinge on what the text means. The tastes of the period, which you may find to be more revealing, can sometimes be found in the public figures of the day, who symbolize the codes of behavior approved by others. Sometimes the tastes lurk in seemingly insignificant details, such as dress, family customs, advertising, or home decoration. All such matters play a part in how a work is received by the reading public. If a work conflicts with what readers believe (or want to believe), it may meet with resistance. If it reinforces beliefs or satisfies curiosity about a topic, it is more likely to meet with favor. Such research becomes especially meaningful when the social codes and forces at work in a culture appear to conflict with each other.

- The text. Listening for all the voices—present and past as well as one's own—enriches and deepens possibilities for meaning. Although one narrative may be dominant, no text includes only a single one. The world that the text presents is an interaction of different, dynamic discourses that shape and are shaped by one another.
Drafting and Revising

The Introduction One way of opening your new historicist analysis is to present a general sketch of the era in which the text is set. An overall look at the narrative's time and place can ground the discussion that follows. The guiding word here is general. The body of the essay will present specific information about politics, behaviors, figures, and institutions, so the introduction should do little more than present a panoramic view of the environment. You may want to think of the opening as an aerial photograph that shows the layout of the countryside. In the course of the discussion, you will provide close-up shots of that overview.

If you prefer to be more probing than such an introduction permits, an alternative opening is to move directly into your discussion about what the work contributes to your understanding of human experience in the particular time and place in which it is set. This approach involves making some generalizations about the text's interpretation of the culture it represents, which your ensuing discussion will go on to support. For example, you may want to comment on whether (and how) the text supports or challenges the dominant discourses of its own era and those of later ones, or you may choose to explain how the text reveals the complexity of the period.

The Body One way to organize the body of your discussion comes directly from the prereading process described earlier. That is, you can address the three topics suggested by the prereading's categories of investigation: the world of the author, personal and public; the historical-cultural environment of the text, both the one it depicts and the one in which it was produced; and the internal world of the text itself, the discourses that generate the narrative. In the case of all three, you should be attentive to the power structure that is in place, questioning inequalities and pointing out social forces that build community and those that destroy it.

Information about the author's life can shed light on the forces and issues that helped create the text. People and events that were significant to the writer and whether they were positive or negative experiences can point directly to intent and purpose. Philosophical and political grounding can explain explicit and implicit social commentary. A writer's letters, interviews, and journals can provide comments that illuminate intended audiences and effects. To isolate such helpful information, you can ask some of the following questions:

- What were the formative experiences in the writer's life?
- Who were the significant people in the writer's life?
- What texts affected the writer's thinking?
- What religious-spiritual issues were important to the writer?
- What was the writer's general political stance?
- What social class did the writer's family occupy?
- As an adult, what social class did the writer aspire to belong to?
- How much social power did the writer's family have?
- From how many different social classes and types of work did the writer draw friends?
- What social issues were important to the writer?
- What public roles did the writer assume?
- What one-word label would describe the voice of the narrator in this text?

Looking beyond the author to the culture in which he or she lived means examining events and texts that may seem to lie at some distance from the one under scrutiny. You will want to include social actions, relationships, and documents—all situations that involve exchanges of power. You will look for significance not only in major incidents but also in minor details. Helpful information can be found by asking several kinds of questions. The first has to do with historical events of the period:

- What were the major cultural and historical events of the period? What connections do they have with the text?
- What resistance was there to these events, and what was the source of the resistance?
- What were the major controversies of the period? Are they explicitly or obliquely mentioned in the text?
- What or who represented the power bases in the controversy? Which group was dominant? Which ones were not?
- What professions and disciplines held power? The church? The law? Science? Academia?
Who were the major figures of the period?
What characteristics did those figures embody that were deemed to be admirable? Which were deemed to be objectionable?
What was the source of their power and influence?
Who or what opposed (or at least resented) their power and influence?
Where do you see power operating secretly—that is, not openly or explicitly?
How did those who held power prevent opposition to or subversion of it?

Another avenue of inquiry regarding the work and the world outside of it deals with written texts of the period. It asks questions such as these:

How is the style of this text similar to or different from other literary texts of the era?
How do the purposes of this text repeat, conflict with, or repeat other texts of the day?
How does this text fit (or not fit) into the nonliterary texts of the same period?
How has this text influenced and been influenced by other texts?

A third group of questions dealing with the work of literature and the world beyond it examines the interactions of the two, including the connections between the text and the world it depicts, the one in which it was published, and those of subsequent periods. You can ask questions such as these:

What would have attracted readers to this work at the time it was published?
In later periods?
What was the work’s public and critical reception at the time of publication?
What has changed about the way it has been read since publication?
What models of behavior does this work support?
What do the answers to the preceding four questions tell you about the various cultures represented?
How have values changed since the work was published?
How have values changed since the period in which the work is set?
Has the text changed its culture or any other culture? If so, how?

In addition to examining the life and thought of the author and the cultural ambience of the work’s times, you will also need to look intently at the text itself as a response to both of the other two areas of interest. To determine what commentary the text offers regarding the larger world outside itself, you can ask the following questions:

What various discourses do you meet in the text?
Which ones are powerful?
Which represent the experience of people who have traditionally been overlooked, marginalized, or misrepresented?

What conflicts do you discern in the text between the discourse of the powerful and that of the powerless?
How do conflicting discourses in the text influence and shape each other by agreeing, complementing, or contradicting each other?
How does this text support a particular discourse? What ideology does that support suggest?
What are the social rules observed in the text?
Is the text critical of those rules, or does it treat them as models of behavior?
How does the text support or challenge the values, beliefs, and/or practices of the culture it depicts?
What does the ideological stance imply about the culture it depicts, that of the author’s times, and that of subsequent periods?
How does this text suggest that history does not necessarily proceed in an orderly, positive direction?

The Conclusion If you have followed the suggestions offered here for drafting your essay, you may not have yet mentioned your own stance regarding the text. If that is the case, the conclusion provides an opportunity for you to make a disclaimer as to the certainty of your analysis. Because all readers are inevitably influenced by the times in which they live, nobody approaches a text from a completely unbiased perspective. In an effort to give as true an account of a text as is possible, the responsible new historicist critic will state his or her attitudes and the cultural principles that have led to the analysis. Such a self-positioning will not alter the slant of the critical comments, but it will give the reader a better chance of understanding their source and significance.
Sample Response Paper: Applying New Historicism to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”
19 Aug. 2014

Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. The story reveals her implicit cynicism, but the addition of the story’s context, which taking a New Historicism approach uncovers, allows us to understand even more fully that “The Lottery” paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

Because of its implied condemnation of the reader, the story evoked even greater shock, horror, and even outrage in its contemporary American readers than it does in its current readers. In 1948 when the story was published, the world had already been shocked by the horrors of the Holocaust and the battlefields of World War II. However, in the almost three years between the end of the war and the story’s publication, the United States had been working hard to return to normalcy, to its prewar idyllic state. Besides, as Thomas Du Bose explains, Americans considered themselves the good guys, having fought and won against the Nazis and, “[h]aving
recently vanquished a cruel and inhumane enemy, perhaps . . . were not ready for a story that implied that they themselves could be cruel and inhumane. Jackson hints that these characteristics are woven into the fabric of the United States by giving her characters names that were prominent in the nation’s early years (for example, Adams and Hutchinson)” (par. 13). In addition to the familiar American family names—Martin, Jones, Adams, Summers, Hutchinson—that appear in the story are those that have had their pronunciation Americanized—Dellacroy for the French Delacroix—and especially the American nicknames of the children—Bobby, Harry, Davy—and adults—Joe, Steve, Tessie—alike. It is clear the reader is meant to recognize these characters and even to identify with them. But in recognizing them as Americans and as like themselves, readers also had to accept the story’s premise that the brutality described in it could happen here in contrast to the commonly and deeply held ideology of the time that “such atrocities could happen in Nazi Germany but not in the United States” (Yarmove 242; par.9). For Ruth Franklin, then, “it is no wonder that the story’s first readers reacted so vehemently to this ugly glimpse of their own faces in the mirror” (par.11). The image they saw in that mirror stated plainly there was no return to innocence, no unknowing “the capacity of ordinary citizens to do evil” (Franklin, par.11). The modern horrors of the modern world were fully upon them, most horrifying of all the knowledge of their own capacity to commit them.

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in
the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson's final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson's appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.
Works Cited

