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New historical and cultural criticism

As we've seen in previous chapters, critical theories can overlap with one another in a number of ways. Marxists can draw on psychoanalytic concepts to help them analyze the debilitating psychological effects of capitalism. Feminists can draw on Marxist concepts to examine the socioeconomic oppression of women. Essays analyzing the conventions of American literary interpretation can be included both in structuralist anthologies and in reader-response anthologies. And so forth.

Despite such overlap, however, most critical theories remain distinct from one another in terms of their purpose. Let's look, for example, at the very different goals of the critical theories just mentioned. Marxism attempts to reveal the ways in which our socioeconomic system is the ultimate source of our experience. Feminism attempts to reveal the ways in which patriarchal gender roles are the ultimate source of our experience. Psychoanalysis attempts to reveal the ways in which repressed psychological conflicts are the ultimate source of our experience. Structuralism attempts to reveal the simple structural systems that make possible our understanding of an otherwise chaotic world. And reader-response theory attempts to reveal the operations whereby readers create the texts they read.

Sometimes critical theories overlap so much, however, that it is difficult to determine the ways in which they are different, especially when practitioners disagree about what those differences are. Such is the case with new historicism and cultural criticism. As we'll see, these two fields share so much common theoretical ground that their approaches to literary interpretation are often quite similar. For the sake of clarity, however, and in order to fully appreciate the differences that do exist between new historicism and cultural criticism, we will begin by discussing the two fields separately. And because new historicists have articulated their theoretical premises more thoroughly than have cultural critics, we'll

start with new historicism. Once you have a fairly clear idea of the new historical enterprise, it will be easier to see the ways in which cultural criticism compares and contrasts with it.

New historicism

Most of us raised to think about history in the traditional way would read an account of a Revolutionary War battle written by an American historian in 1944 and ask, if we asked anything at all, "Is this account accurate?" or "What does this battle tell us about the 'spirit of the age' in which it was fought?" In contrast, a new historicist would read the same account of that battle and ask, "What does this account tell us about the political agendas and ideological conflicts of the culture that produced and read the account in 1944?" New historical interest in the battle itself would produce such questions as, "At the time in which it was fought, how was this battle represented (in newspapers, magazines, tracts, government documents, stories, speeches, drawings, and photographs) by the American colonies or by Britain (or by European countries), and what do these representations tell us about how the American Revolution shaped and was shaped by the cultures that represented it?"

As you can see, the questions asked by traditional historians and by new historicists are quite different, and that's because these two approaches to history are based on very different views of what history is and how we can know it. 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?"

For most traditional historians, 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. Furthermore, they believe we are perfectly capable, through *objective* analysis, of uncovering the facts about historical events, and those facts can sometimes reveal the spirit of the age, that is, the world view held by the culture to which those facts refer. Indeed, some of the most popular traditional historical accounts have offered a key concept that would explain the worldview of a given historical population, such as the Renaissance notion of the Great Chain of Being—the cosmic hierarchy of creation, with God at the top of the ladder, human beings at the middle, and the lowliest creatures at the bottom—which has been used to argue that the guiding spirit of Elizabethan culture was a belief in the importance of order in all domains of human life.[1] You can see this aspect of the traditional approach in history classes that study past events in terms of the spirit of an age, such as the Age of Reason or the Age of Enlightenment, and you can see it in literature classes that study literary works in terms of historical periods, such as the neoclassical, romantic, or modernist periods. Finally, traditional historians generally believe that history is *progressive*, that the human species is improving over the course of time, advancing in its moral, cultural, and technological accomplishments.

New historicists, in contrast, don't believe we have clear access to any but the most basic facts of history. We can know, for example, that George Washington was the first American president and that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo. But our understanding of what such facts mean, of how they fit within the complex web of competing ideologies and conflicting social, political, and cultural agendas of the time and place in which they occurred is, for new historicists, strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact. Even when traditional historians believe they are sticking to the facts, the way they contextualize those facts (including which facts are deemed important enough to report and which are left out) determines what story those facts will tell. From this perspective, there is no such thing as a presentation of facts; there is only interpretation. Furthermore, new historicists argue that reliable interpretations are, for a number of reasons, difficult to produce.

The first and most important reason for this difficulty, new historicists believe, is the *impossibility of objective analysis*. Like all human beings, historians live in a particular time and place, and their views of both current and past events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience within their own culture. Historians may believe they're being objective, but their own views of what is right and wrong, what is civilized and uncivilized, what is important and unimportant, and the like, will strongly influence the ways in which they interpret events. For example, the traditional view that history is progressive is based on the belief, held in the past by many Anglo-European historians, that the "primitive" cultures of native peoples are less evolved than, and therefore inferior to, the "civilized" Anglo-European cultures. As a result, ancient cultures with highly developed art forms, ethical codes, and spiritual philosophies, such as the tribal cultures of Native Americans and Africans, were often misrepresented as lawless, superstitious, and savage.

Another reason for the difficulty in producing reliable interpretations of history is its complexity. For new historicists, history cannot be understood simply as a linear progression of events. At any given point in history, any given culture may be progressing in some areas and regressing in others. And any two historians may disagree about what constitutes progress and what doesn't, for these terms are matters of definition. That is, history isn't an orderly parade into a continually improving future, as many traditional historians have believed. It's more like an improvised dance consisting of an infinite variety of steps, following any

new route at any given moment, and having no particular goal or destination. Individuals and groups of people may have goals, but human history does not.

Similarly, while events certainly have causes, new historicists argue that those causes are usually multiple, complex, and difficult to analyze. One cannot make simple causal statements with any certainty. In addition, causality is not a one-way street from cause to effect. Any given event—whether it be a political election or a children's cartoon show—is a product of its culture, but it also affects that culture in return. In other words, all events—including everything from the creation of an art work, to a televised murder trial, to the persistence of or change in the condition of the poor—*are shaped by and shape* the culture in which they emerge.

In a similar manner, our *subjectivity*, or selfhood, is shaped by and shapes the culture into which we were born. For most new historicists, our individual identity is not merely a product of society. Neither is it merely a product of our own individual will and desire. Instead, individual identity and its cultural milieu inhabit, reflect, and define each other. Their relationship is mutually constitutive (they create each other) and dynamically unstable. Thus, the old argument between determinism and free will can't be settled because it rests on the wrong question: "Is human identity socially determined or are human beings free agents?" For new historicism, this question cannot be answered because it involves a choice between two entities that are not wholly separate. Rather, the proper question is, "What are the processes by which individual identity and social formations—such as political, educational, legal, and religious institutions and ideologies—create, promote, or change each other?" For every society constrains individual thought and action within a network of cultural limitations while it simultaneously enables individuals to think and act. Our subjectivity, then, is a lifelong *process* of negotiating our way, consciously and unconsciously, among the constraints and freedoms offered at any given moment in time by the society in which we live.

Thus, according to new historicists, *power* does not emanate only from the top of the political and socioeconomic structure. According to French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose ideas have strongly influenced the development of new historicism, power circulates in all directions, to and from all social levels, at all times. And the vehicle by which power circulates is a never-ending proliferation of *exchange*: (1) the exchange of material goods through such practices as buying and selling, bartering, gambling, taxation, charity, and various forms of theft; (2) the exchange of people through such institutions as marriage, adoption, kidnapping, and slavery; and (3) the exchange of ideas through the various discourses a culture produces.

A *discourse* is a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience. For example, you may be familiar with the discourse of modern science, the discourse of liberal humanism, the discourse of white supremacy, the discourse of ecological awareness, the discourse of Christian fundamentalism, and the like. And as you read the chapters of this textbook, you will become familiar with the discourses of psychoanalytic criticism, Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, and so on. Although the word *discourse* has roughly the same meaning as the word *ideology*, and the two terms are often used interchangeably, the word *discourse* draws attention to the role of language as the vehicle of ideology.

From a new historical perspective, no discourse by itself can adequately explain the complex cultural dynamics of social power. For there is no *monolithic* (single, unified, universal) spirit of an age, and there is no adequate *totalizing* explanation of history (an explanation that provides a single key to all aspects of a given culture). There is, instead, a dynamic, unstable interplay among discourses: they are always in a state of flux, overlapping and competing with one another (or, to use new historical terminology, *negotiating* exchanges of power) in any number of ways at any given point in time. Furthermore, no discourse is permanent. Discourses wield power for those in charge, but they also stimulate opposition to that power. This is one reason why new historicists believe that the relationship between individual identity and society is mutually constitutive: on the whole, human beings are never merely victims of an oppressive society, for they can find various ways to oppose authority in their personal and public lives.

For new historicism, even the dictator of a small country doesn't wield absolute power on his own. To maintain dominance, his power must circulate in numerous discourses, for example, in the discourse of religion (which can promote belief in the "divine right" of kings or in God's love of hierarchical society), in the discourse of science (which can support the reigning elite in terms of a theory of Darwinian "survival of the fittest"), in the discourse of fashion (which can promote the popularity of leaders by promoting copycat attire, as we saw when Nehru jackets were popular and when the fashion world copied the style of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy), in the discourse of the law (which can make it a treasonous offense to disagree with a ruler's decisions), and so on.

As these examples suggest, what is "right," "natural," and "normal" are matters of definition. Thus, in different cultures at different points in history, homosexuality has been deemed abnormal, normal, criminal, or admirable. The same can be said of incest, cannibalism, and women's desire for political equality. In fact, Michel Foucault has suggested that all definitions of "insanity," "crime," and sexual "perversion" are social constructs by means of which ruling powers

maintain their control. We accept these definitions as "natural" only because they are so ingrained in our culture.

Just as definitions of social and antisocial behavior promote the power of certain individuals and groups, so do particular versions of historical events. Certainly, the whitewashing of General Custer's now-infamous military campaigns against Native Americans served the desire of the white American power structure of his day to obliterate Native American peoples so that the government could seize their lands. And that same whitewashing continued to serve the white American power structure for many a decade beyond Custer's time, for even those who had knowledge of Custer's misdeeds deemed it unwise to air America's dirty historical laundry, even in front of Americans. Analogously, had the Nazis won World War II, we would all be reading a very different account of the war, and of the genocide of millions of Jews, than the accounts we read in American history books today. Thus, new historicism views historical accounts as narratives, as stories, that are inevitably biased according to the point of view, conscious or unconscious, of those who write them. The more unaware historians are of their biases—that is, the more "objective" they think they are—the more those biases are able to control their narratives.

So far, we've seen new historicism's claims about what historical analysis *cannot* do. Historical analysis (1) cannot be objective, (2) cannot adequately demonstrate that a particular spirit of the times or world view accounts for the complexities of any given culture, and (3) cannot adequately demonstrate that history is linear, causal, or progressive. We can't understand a historical event, object, or person in isolation from the web of discourses in which it was represented because we can't understand it in isolation from the meanings it carried at that time. The more we isolate it, the more we will tend to view it through the meanings of our own time and place and, perhaps, our own desire to believe that the human race is improving with the passage of time.

Given these limitations, what *can* historical analysis accomplish? What approaches to historical understanding can be developed, and, most important for our purposes, what kinds of analyses can new historical literary critics attempt? If you've read chapter 8, "Deconstructive Criticism," you're in a good position to understand the answer to these questions because a good deal of new historical practice incorporates deconstructive insights about human language and experience. For example, we might say that new historicism deconstructs the traditional opposition between history (traditionally thought of as factual) and literature (traditionally thought of as fictional). For new historicism considers history a text that can be interpreted the same way literary critics interpret literary texts, and conversely, it considers literary texts cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating

in the time and place in which those texts were written. Let's take a closer look at each of these claims by discussing, first, the key elements of new historical practice and, then, the implications of new historicism for literary criticism.

By and large, we know history only in its textual form, that is, in the form of the documents, written statistics, legal codes, diaries, letters, speeches, tracts, news articles, and the like in which are recorded the attitudes, policies, procedures, and events that occurred in a given time and place. That is, even when historians base their findings on the kinds of "primary sources" listed above, rather than on the interpretations of other historians (secondary sources), those primary sources are almost always in the form of some sort of writing. As such, they require the same kinds of analyses literary critics perform on literary texts. For example, historical documents can be studied in terms of their rhetorical strategies (the stylistic devices by which texts try to achieve their purposes); they can be deconstructed to reveal the limitations of their own ideological assumptions; and they can be examined for the purpose of revealing their explicit and implicit patriarchal, racist, and homophobic agendas. In addition, historical accounts—secondary sources, written during the period in question or at a later date—can be analyzed in the same manner.

In other words, new historicists consider both primary and secondary sources of historical information forms of narrative. Both tell some kind of story, and therefore those stories can be analyzed using the tools of literary criticism. Indeed, we might say that in bringing to the foreground the suppressed historical narratives of marginalized groups—such as women, people of color, the poor, the working class, gay men and lesbians, prisoners, the inhabitants of mental institutions, and so on—new historicism has deconstructed the white, male, Anglo-European historical narrative to reveal its disturbing, hidden subtext: the experiences of those peoples it has oppressed in order to maintain the dominance that allowed it to control what most Americans know about history.

In fact, a focus on the historical narratives of marginalized peoples has been such an important feature of new historicism that some theorists have asked how new historicists can accept narratives from oppressed peoples any more readily than they have accepted narratives from the patriarchal Anglo-European power structure. One answer to this question is that a plurality of voices, including an equal representation of historical narratives from all groups, helps ensure that a *master narrative*—a narrative told from a single cultural point of view that, nevertheless, presumes to offer the only accurate version of history—will no longer control our historical understanding. At this point in time, we still do not have an equal representation of historical narratives from all groups. And even as the historical narratives of some groups are becoming more and more numerous, such as those of women and of people of color, those narratives generally do not

receive the same kind of attention as patriarchal Anglo-European narratives do in the classroom, where most of us learn about history. Therefore, new historicism tries to promote the development of and gain attention for the histories of marginalized peoples.

A plurality of historical voices also tends to raise issues that new historicism considers important, such as how ideology operates in the formation of personal and group identity, how a culture's perception of itself (for example, Americans' belief that they are rugged individualists) influences its political, legal, and social policies and customs, and how power circulates in a given culture. We can see how a plurality of historical voices tends to raise these kinds of issues if we imagine the differences among the following hypothetical college courses on the American Revolution: (1) a course that studies traditional American accounts of the war; (2) a course that contrasts traditional American accounts of the war with traditional British, French, Dutch, and Spanish accounts of the war, countries for whom the American Revolution was but a moment in their struggle for colonial power, primarily in the Caribbean; (3) and a course that contrasts the above accounts with Native American accounts of the war recorded from the oral histories of tribes that were affected by it.

As we move, in our imagination, from the first course to the second and then to the third, our focus moves farther away from the "factual" content of historical accounts and foregrounds, instead, the ways in which history is a text that is interpreted by different cultures to fit the ideological needs of their own power structures, which is a new historical concern. In this context, new historicism might be defined as the history of stories cultures tell themselves about themselves. Or, as a corrective to some traditional historical accounts, new historicism might be defined as the history of lies cultures tell themselves. Thus, there is no history, in the traditional sense of the term. There are only representations of history.

In addition to its focus on marginalized historical narratives, new historical analysis involves what is called *thick description*, a term borrowed from anthropology. Thick description attempts, through close, detailed examination of a given cultural production—such as birthing practices, ritual ceremonies, games, penal codes, works of art, copyright laws, and the like—to discover the meanings that particular cultural production had for the people in whose community it occurred and to reveal the social conventions, cultural codes, and ways of seeing the world that gave that production those meanings. Thus, thick description is not a search for facts but a search for meanings, and as the examples of cultural productions listed above illustrate, thick description focuses on the personal side of history—the history of family dynamics, of leisure activities, of sexual practices, of childrearing customs—as much as or more than on such traditional

historical topics as military campaigns and the passage of laws. Indeed, because traditional historicism tended to ignore or marginalize private life as subjective and irrelevant, new historicism tries to compensate for this omission by bringing issues concerned with private life into the foreground of historical inquiry.

Let me summarize an example of thick description offered by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Imagine a young man winking at someone across a crowded room. A "thin description" of the event would describe it as a rapid contraction of the right eyelid—period. A thick description would attempt to find out what the wink *meant* in the context in which it occurred. First, was it a wink—that is, a public gesture intended to communicate a message—or just an involuntary twitch? If it was a wink, was it a wink performing its usual activity of imparting a conspiratorial signal? Or was it a fake wink, intended to make others believe a conspiracy was underway when, in fact, it was not? In this case, the wink would not mean conspiracy but deception. Or was it a parody of the fake wink just described, intended to satirize the person who winked in order to deceive? In this case, the wink would mean neither conspiracy nor deception, but ridicule. Now suppose that, in this last example, the would-be satirist is unsure of his ability: he doesn't want to be mistaken for someone merely twitching or winking; he wants his friends to know that he's mocking someone. So to be sure he can do it properly, he practices his satirical wink in front of a mirror. In this case, the wink would have a complicated meaning: it would be the rehearsal of a parody of a friend faking a wink to deceive others that a conspiracy is underway. Although this example of thick description may push the point a bit far, it illustrates the new historical notion that history is a matter of interpretations, not facts, and that interpretations always occur within a framework of social conventions.

Finally, new historicism's claim that historical analysis is unavoidably subjective is not an attempt to legitimize a self-indulgent, "anything goes" attitude toward the writing of history. Rather, the inevitability of personal bias makes it imperative that new historicists be as aware of and as forthright as possible about their own psychological and ideological positions relative to the material they analyze so that their readers can have some idea of the human "lens" through which they are viewing the historical issues at hand. This practice is called *self- positioning*.

For example, near the end of Louis Montrose's new historical essay, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," he announces his own biases, which include those produced by his role as a Renaissance scholar and professor. He tells us that he has a personal investment in those representations of the Renaissance in texts for which he feels a particular affinity, such as those of Shakespeare and Spenser. Furthermore, he acknowledges that, in analyzing

these texts, he writes about issues that are socially relevant today because he wants to participate not only in the current rethinking of Elizabethan culture but in the current rethinking of our own culture. Finally, Montrose admits that although his writing works to undermine traditional historical approaches to literary scholarship—such as the traditional demarcation of a finite period

New historicism and literature

How, specifically, do new historical concepts operate in the domain of literary criticism? Although new historical literary criticism embeds our study of literary texts in the study of history, the study of history, as we've just seen, isn't

produced it) are mutually constitutive: they create each other. Like the dynamic interplay between individual identity and society, literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts.

Perhaps we can best see how new historical critics differ from their traditional counterparts by noting some of the ways in which new historical readings of specific literary works might contrast with traditional historical readings of those same works. We'll look at two well-known texts: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). It's interesting to note that, in our first example, the author wrote about a situation—Europe's commercial exploitation of Africa—produced by his own society and one that he'd experienced firsthand. In our second example, the author wrote about a population—former slaves struggling to survive both their own memories of the past and the harsh realities of daily life in antebellum Ohio—that had lived over one hundred years before the publication of her novel. However, neither Conrad's firsthand experience with his subject matter nor Morrison's temporal distance from hers means that either narrative is necessarily more "accurate" than the other. For traditional historical criticism, the historical accuracy of both texts must be judged by comparisons with historical accounts of the populations represented. And for new historicism, historical "accuracy" is never a certainty: *Heart of Darkness* and *Beloved* offer us interpretations of the populations they depict, which we can use, in turn, to help us interpret both those populations and the circulation of discourses within which Conrad and Morrison wrote these novels.

A traditional historical reading of *Heart of Darkness* might analyze, based on historical accounts of European activities in the Congo during the nineteenth century, how faithful the novel is to the historical realities of European exploitation of human and natural resources in its quest for ivory. Was the waste of human life as flagrant as Conrad portrays it? What were the politics involved in the division of African territories among various European powers and in the administration of those territories? Or a traditional literary historian might examine biographical materials in order to determine what parts of the novel are drawn from Conrad's actual experience during his own trip up the Congo River as a steamship captain for a Belgian company. To what extent are Marlow's experiences actually those of Conrad? To what extent does the novel depict events that Conrad saw or heard about himself? Finally, a traditional historical critic might analyze biographical materials in order to learn about Conrad's creative imagination. What was the influence on Conrad's writing of his early interest in the great explorers of the nineteenth century? Did he keep extensive journals of his experiences as a sailor, or did he write largely from memory? How did his experience in the Congo, including the permanent impairment of his health that resulted therefrom, affect his artistic production?

Similarly, a traditional historical reading of *Beloved* might analyze—based on historical accounts of nineteenth-century American slaves, slaveholders, and former slaves—whether or not Morrison's depiction of this aspect of American experience is faithful to historical reality. Do her portraits of the Garners, their neighbors, Schoolteacher, and the Bodwins accurately represent the range of values held by slave owners and abolitionists at that time? Did Morrison capture the conflicting viewpoints that delineate the spirit of that troubled age? Or a traditional historical reading might investigate the circumstances of the novel's composition in order to find the historical sources of her characters, setting, and plot. For example, to what extent was Sethe's story modeled on that of runaway slave Margaret Garner, who, like Sethe, killed her baby daughter to save her from being returned to her master's plantation? What other characters and events in the novel are based on actual historical figures and events? What specific historical sources—newspaper accounts, slave narratives, legal documents, records of the Middle Passage, history books, and the like—did Morrison draw on? Finally, a traditional historical critic might analyze the author's reading habits in order to find evidence of the influence of other literary works on her own artistic technique. What African American literature, historical fiction, or Southern fiction did she read, and can their influence be perceived in the novel's plot, characterization, or style?

In contrast to these traditional historical concerns, a new historical analysis of *Heart of Darkness* might examine the ways in which Conrad's narrative embodies two conflicting discourses present in his own culture: anticolonialism and Eurocentrism. The novel's anticolonialist theme, which seems to be a primary focus of the text, can be seen in its representation of the evils of Europe's subordination and exploitation of African peoples. However, as Chinua Achebe observes, the novel nevertheless speaks from an (apparently unconscious) Eurocentric perspective: Marlow's harrowing insight into the European character consists of his realization that Europeans are, beneath their veneer of civilization, as "savage" as the African peoples they intend to subdue, which means that African tribal culture is held to epitomize "savagery." Or, despite the novel's Eurocentric bias, a new historical critic might analyze the text as a kind of prototype, or early embodiment, of new historical analysis. As Brook Thomas points out, Conrad's novel debunks the traditional historicist belief that history is progressive, that the human species improves over time; and its narrative structure, which obscures plot events behind a hazy veil of subjective description, implies that we do not have access to a clear, unbiased view of the past. Finally, a new historical analysis of *Heart of Darkness* might examine the history of the novel's reception by critics and the reading public to discover how the novel shaped and was shaped by discourses circulating at its point of origin (the time and place in which the book was written and published) and over the

passage of time, including speculations about its relationship to possible future audiences. For example, how might the novel's reception over time reveal the ways in which interpretations of the text shaped and have been shaped by the discourses of historical progressivism, social Darwinism, white supremacy, Afrocentrism, multiculturalism, new historicism, and so on?

Similarly, a new historical analysis of *Beloved* might examine how the novel's departures from the historical accounts on which it is based constitute a revision of those accounts, that is, an interpretation of the history it represents. For example, to what extent do the transformations of Denver and Paul D, as they come to understand Sethe's experience, function as a guide for our own understanding of Sethe's historical situation? Or a new historical critic might examine how *Beloved* was shaped by and has shaped the modern debate between two conflicting views of slavery: (1) that slaves were, for the most part, reduced to a childlike dependency on their masters and (2) that slaves managed, much more thoroughly and consistently than has been reported by traditional white historians, to build a coherent system of resistance through the creation of their own coded forms of communication, the establishment of their own communal ties, and the strategic use of personae (such as the "happy slave" or the "dim-witted slave") as camouflage for their opinions, intentions, and subversive activities. Finally, a new historical reading might investigate the circulation of mid-nineteenth century discourses with which specific elements of the plot interact. For example, how do the various views of Sethe depicted in the novel—such as those of Schoolteacher, Mrs. Garner, Amy Denver, Mr. Bodwin, Stamp Paid, Ella, Beloved, and Paul D—reinforce or undermine the mid-nineteenth century discourses of white supremacy, abolitionism, male supremacy, and motherly love?

As you may have noticed, in all of the above examples of traditional historical criticism, history—the historical situation represented in the text, the population portrayed, the author's life and times—is an objective reality that can be known and against which the subjective literary work is interpreted or measured. In contrast, in the new historical examples, the focus is on how the literary text itself functions as a historical discourse interacting with other historical discourses: those circulating at the time and place in which the text is set, at the time the text was published, or at later points in the history of the text's reception. For new historicism is concerned not with historical events as events, but with the ways in which events are interpreted, with historical discourses, with ways of seeing the world and modes of meaning. Indeed, as we saw earlier, historical events are viewed by new historicists not as facts to be documented but as "texts" to be "read" in order to help us speculate about how human cultures, at various historical "moments," have made sense of themselves and their world. We can't really know exactly what happened at any given point in history, but we can know what the people involved believed happened—we can know from their own accounts the various ways in which they interpreted their experience—and we can interpret those interpretations.

For new historical literary critics, then, the literary text, through its representation of human experience at a given time and place, is an interpretation of history. As such, the literary text maps the discourses circulating at the time it was written and is itself one of those discourses. That is, the literary text shaped and was shaped by the discourses circulating in the culture in which it was produced. Likewise, our interpretations of literature shape and are shaped by the culture in which we live.

Cultural criticism

If you've just read the sections on new historicism, you're already acquainted with many of the theoretical premises of cultural criticism, for the two fields share a good deal of the same theoretical ground. In fact, there are more similarities between them than there are differences. For example, cultural criticism shares with new historicism the view that human history and culture constitute a complex arena of dynamic forces of which we can construct only a partial, subjective picture. Both fields share the belief that individual human subjectivity (selfhood) develops in a give-and-take relationship with its cultural milieu: while we are constrained within the limits set for us by our culture, we may struggle against those limits or transform them. And both fields are interdisciplinary or, perhaps more accurately, antidisciplinary, for both argue that human experience, which is the stuff of human history and culture, cannot be adequately understood by means of academic disciplines that carve it up into such artificially separated categories as sociology, psychology, literature, and so forth. Indeed, both cultural criticism and new historicism draw heavily on the same philosophical sources, in particular the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, and in practice, cultural criticism is not always readily distinguishable from new historicism.

In addition to its similarity to new historicism, cultural criticism can pose an initial problem for beginners in the way the term is often used, in its broadest sense, to refer to any kind of analysis of any aspect of culture. For example, the readings of *The Great Gatsby* offered in this textbook in the chapters on Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, lesbian/gay/queer criticism, and postcolonial/African American criticism could all be considered examples of cultural criticism, in its broadest sense, because all of these interpretations use the novel to explore some aspect of American culture. Even my psychoanalytic reading of Fitzgerald's novel—which suggests that the story illustrates the psychology of dysfunctional love—could be revised to function as a cultural critique if I were

to argue that the kind of dysfunctional love illustrated in *The Great Gatsby* is a form of cultural malaise produced by the cultural values that came to the fore during the American 1920s. And herein lies one important difference between cultural criticism and new historicism. Cultural criticism often draws on such political theories as those listed above because it tends to be much more politically oriented than new historicism.

Originally an outgrowth of Marxist criticism, then organized as an analytical approach in its own right during the mid-1960s, cultural criticism, in the narrower definition of the term, argues that working-class culture has been misunderstood and undervalued. The dominant class dictates what forms of art are to be considered "high" (superior) culture, such as the ballet, the opera, and the other "fine" arts. Forms of popular culture, on the other hand—such as television situation comedies, popular music, and pulp fiction—have been relegated to the status of "low" (inferior) culture. For cultural critics, however, there is no meaningful distinction between "high" and "low" forms of culture. For all cultural productions can be analyzed to reveal the *cultural work* they perform—that is, the ways in which they shape our experience by transmitting or transforming ideologies—which means, of course, the role of cultural productions in the circulation of power.

Indeed, cultural critics believe that the dominant class defines "high" and "low" culture in order to reinforce its own image of superiority and thus its own power. Nevertheless, cultural critics argue, subordinate populations produce forms of art that not only transform their own experience but affect the whole culture as well. The AIDS quilt might be considered an example of such a cultural production. Clearly, many cultural critics draw on Marxist, feminist, or other political theories in performing their analyses because those analyses often have political agendas, such as analyzing (and valorizing) the cultural productions of an oppressed group or exploring the power relations at work in the categorization of specific art forms as examples of "high" or "low" culture. As we saw earlier, many new historians, in contrast, believe that any single critical theory, political or otherwise, is too narrowly focused to adequately examine the complex operations of human culture.

So far, I've used the word *culture* without actually defining what cultural criticism means by the term. For cultural critics, culture is a process, not a product; it is a lived experience, not a fixed definition. More precisely, a culture is a collection of interactive cultures, each of which is growing and changing, each of which is constituted at any given moment in time by the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, occupation, and similar factors that contribute to the experience of its members.

To sum up, then, cultural criticism shares new historicism's theoretical premises except in the following three instances.

1. Cultural criticism tends to be more overtly political in its support of oppressed groups.
2. Because of its political orientation, cultural criticism often draws on Marxist, feminist, and other political theories in performing its analyses.
3. Cultural criticism, in the narrower sense of the term, is especially interested in popular culture.

It is important to remember, however, that even when cultural criticism analyzes the operations of oppression, it does not view oppressed peoples, as political theories sometimes do, as helpless victims. Rather, like new historicism, cultural criticism views oppressed peoples as both victimized by the dominant power structure and as capable of resisting or transforming that power structure.

Cultural criticism and literature

For cultural critics, a literary text, or any other kind of cultural production, performs cultural work to the extent to which it shapes the cultural experience of those who encounter it, that is, to the extent to which it shapes our experience as members of a cultural group. According to Stephen Greenblatt, the following questions can help us begin to examine the kinds of cultural work performed by a literary text.

1. What kinds of behavior, what models of practice, does this work seem to enforce?
2. Why might readers at a particular time and place find this work compelling?
3. Are there differences between my values and the values implicit in the work I am reading?
4. Upon what social understandings does the work depend?
5. Whose freedom of thought or movement might be constrained implicitly or explicitly by this work?
6. What are the larger social structures with which these particular acts of praise or blame that is, the text's apparent ethical orientation might be connected? (226)

In Greenblatt's words, it might "appear that the analysis of culture is the servant of literary study, but in a liberal education broadly conceived it is literary study that is the servant of cultural understanding" (227). Thus, all of the above questions ask us to make connections between the literary text, the culture in which it emerged, and the cultures in which it is interpreted.

Perhaps it would help at this point to consider some specific applications of cultural criticism to literary works. Let's start by describing what a cultural critic might do with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the two texts we used earlier to illustrate the differences between traditional and new historical approaches to literature. As I mentioned before, many new historical readings could be considered forms of cultural criticism, broadly conceived. So all of the examples of new historical interpretations of Conrad's and Morrison's novels discussed earlier could be considered examples of cultural criticism to the extent that these interpretations examine the kind of cultural work performed by the literary text.

Let's look, however, at what kinds of readings might distinguish cultural critiques of *Heart of Darkness* and *Beloved* from new historical interpretations of these works. Given that both novels have been canonized as works of "high" culture, a cultural critic, in the narrower sense of the term, might choose to analyze popular representations of these novels, rather than just the novels themselves. For example, a cultural critic might study Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1978), which, as most film fans know, is based on Conrad's novel, or the made-for-television version of *Heart of Darkness* starring John Malkovich (1993). Similarly, a cultural critic might examine the film version of *Beloved* starring Oprah Winfrey (1998) or a television miniseries that might someday be produced based on Morrison's novel.

In analyzing these popular forms of canonized works, a cultural critic might try to determine the ways in which the popular versions transform the ideological content of the novels. For example, does the film version seem to have a darker vision of human nature than the novel? Or, in contrast, does the film provide a more optimistic view of the human condition that the novel does not offer? How does the film version handle narrative ambiguities, such as Marlow's reliability in *Heart of Darkness* or the meaning of the baby ghost in *Beloved*? Most important, what do these transformations suggest about the popular imagination—that is, about the psychological and ideological needs of the viewing public—or about the entertainment industry's conception of the viewing public?

A cultural critic would also be inclined to take into account the ways in which a media production might not be viewed the way the entertainment industry intends it to be viewed. For example, as John Fiske observes,

> [h]omeless Native Americans . . . chose to watch old westerns on the VCR in their shelter, but they selected only the first half of them, and switched off the movie at the point when the wagon train had been successfully attacked, the fort captured—they chose not to watch the reassertion of white empire. Aboriginal people watching the Rambo movies in Australia chose to ignore the conflict between the free west and the communist east and focused instead on the conflict between Rambo, whom they saw, by a selection of physical and behavioral characteristics, as a member of the third world like them, and the white officer class that systematically and mistakenly underestimated his abilities. (327)

So whether examining popular culture, "high" culture, or both, cultural critics try to map the changing ideological functions that a given cultural production performs at the hands of those who respond to it.

Some questions new historical and cultural critics ask about literary texts

The following questions are intended to summarize approaches to literary analysis employed by new historicists and cultural critics. In the terminology of cultural criticism, these questions offer us ways to examine the cultural work performed by literary texts. As you read these questions and imagine the ways in which a new historical or cultural critic might address them, keep in mind that, for such critics, no historical event, artifact, or ideology can be completely understood in isolation from the innumerable historical events, artifacts, and ideologies among which it circulates, and our own cultural experience inevitably influences our perceptions, making true objectivity impossible. For we can use new historical and cultural criticism properly only if we keep clearly in mind that our analysis is always incomplete, partial, and our perspective is always subjective. We can't stand outside our own culture and analyze texts from an objective vantage point. We can write only from within our own historical moment.

1. How does the literary text function as part of a continuum with other historical and cultural texts from the same period, for example, penal codes, birthing practices, educational priorities, the treatment of children under the law, other art forms (including popular art forms), attitudes toward sexuality, and the like? That is, taken as part of a "thick description" of a given culture at a given point in history, what does this literary work add to our tentative understanding of human experience in that particular time and place, including the ways in which individual identity shapes and is shaped by cultural institutions?
2. 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? Put another way, how does the text promote ideologies that support and/or undermine the prevailing power structures of the time and place in which it was written and/or interpreted?
3. Using rhetorical analysis (analysis of a text's purpose and the stylistic means by which it tries to achieve that purpose), what does the literary

text add to our understanding of the ways in which literary and nonliterary discourses (such as political, scientific, economic, and educational theories) have influenced, overlapped with, and competed with one another at specific historical moments?

4. What does the literary work suggest about the experience of groups of people who have been ignored, underrepresented, or misrepresented by traditional history (for example, laborers, prisoners, women, people of color, lesbians and gay men, children, the insane, and so on)? Keep in mind that new historical and cultural criticism usually include attention to the intersection of the literary work with nonliterary discourses prevalent in the culture in which the work emerged and/or in the cultures in which it has been interpreted and often focus on such issues as the circulation of power and the dynamics of personal and group identity.
5. How has the work's reception by literary critics and the reading public—including the reception at its point of origin, changing responses to the work over time, and its possible future relationship with its audience—been shaped by and shaped the culture in which that reception occurred?

Depending on the literary text in question, we might ask one or any combination of these questions. Or we might come up with a useful question not listed here. These are just some starting points to get us thinking about literary texts as new historical and cultural critics do. Keep in mind that not all new historical or cultural critics will interpret the same work in the same way even if they focus on the same theoretical concepts and have the same purpose. As in every field, even expert practitioners disagree! Our goal is to use new historicism and cultural criticism to help enrich our reading of literature by helping us see how literary texts participate in the circulation of discourses, shaping and shaped by the culture in which they emerged and by the cultures in which they are [illegible] the ways in which the circulation of discourses [illegible] political/social/intellectual/economic power; and by helping us see [illegible] cultural positioning influences our interpretations of [illegible] literary texts.

The following reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is offered as an example of what a new historical interpretation of that novel might yield. In the terminology of cultural critics, it analyzes the cultural work performed by the novel. I call my interpretation of Fitzgerald's novel a new historical reading because it does not have the kind of overt political agenda often associated with cultural criticism and because I rely rather heavily on terminology associated with new historicism. However, the overlap between the two fields is such that [illegible] could also be called, quite legitimately, a cultural critique [illegible] argument makes no distinction between Fitzgerald's canonized [illegible] forms of popular culture informed by the same ideology.

Specifically, I argue that the novel circulates one of the dominant discourses of the period in which it was written: the discourse of the self-made man, which held that any poor boy in America, if he had the right personal qualities, could rise to the top of the financial world. In addition, I examine the ways in which *The Great Gatsby* embodies one of the central contradictions of the discourse of the self-made man: although this discourse claims to open the annals of American history to all those who have the ambition and perseverance required to "make their mark," the discourse is permeated by the desire to "escape" history, to transcend the historical realities of time, place, and human limitation.

The discourse of the self-made man: a new historical reading of *The Great Gatsby*

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) was published during one of America's greatest periods of economic growth. As the nation expanded its borders and developed its industries between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the stock-market crash in 1929, many private fortunes were made. Everyone in America knew the success stories of millionaires like John D. Rockefeller, Jay Gould, Jim Fisk, Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, Philip Armour, and James J. Hill. Even Gatsby's father, an uneducated and unsuccessful farmer, is aware of these stories. He says of his son, "If he'd of lived he'd of been a great man. A man like James J. Hill. He'd of helped build up the country" (176; ch. 9). With the exception of J. P. Morgan, the son of a wealthy banker, all of these millionaires were self-made men: from very humble beginnings they rose to their position at the top of the financial world. And popular belief held that any poor boy in America with the right personal qualities could do the same.

Thus, a dominant discourse of the period was the discourse of the self-made man, which circulated in the "success manuals" of the period; in the self-improvement speeches and essays composed by the self-made millionaires of that era; in the Horatio Alger novels; in the McGuffey Readers, which were used throughout the nation to teach young children to read; and in the biographies of famous self-made men. Fitzgerald's novel participates in the circulation of this discourse, I think, in at least two significant ways. It reflects the major tenets of the discourse and, I would argue, it embodies one of its central contradictions: the discourse of the self-made man, while it claims to open the annals of American history to all those who have the ambition and perseverance required to "make their mark," is permeated by the desire to "escape" history and to transcend the historical realities of time, place, and human limitation.

Let's begin by examining the ways in which *The Great Gatsby* reflects the major tenets of the discourse of the self-made man. Of course, readers frequently notice