

FORMATIVE COURSEWORK

To read a work of literature as literature is also to read it as an historical document. Do you agree?

Literature is expressive of the author's life experiences due to social ideology and power structures in place at the time of writing. As Sinfield states "*The strength of ideology derives from the way it gets to be common sense; it 'goes without saying.'* For its production is not an external process, stories are not outside ourselves..." Literature is written for a number of causal reasons, those being the affairs and circumstances of the author within his historical era. In contrast to this, the formalist approach would however go against the argument that a piece of literature cannot be read as a historical document as it takes the standpoint that "...the study of literature should first and foremost, concentrate on the actual works of art themselves" (Wellek and Warren). To carry this line of thought when addressing a text would however neglect a number of other possible meanings (influenced by the historical context in which the text is set) which any given work may be trying to convey.

For a reader to read a piece of a literature in a complete vacuum of historical context would deny him both insight and understanding into the society of the author's time. There is however obvious problems tied to the differing methods of historicist criticism, ranging from limitations in what a given approach can tell a reader, to the problems of interpretation of symbols and meaning in order to link the given work to the society at the time. However, the fact that literature is a product of experience set in relation to the historical events at the time means that literature is embedded in history itself and therefore can be read as an historical document. There has to be a reason as to why the author has picked certain words or phrases due to certain life experiences as a result of the nature of society's issues or anxieties at the time. No piece of literature can exist spontaneously, unless the author is being completely random and fictitious, but even then, he must be doing this for a reason. Therefore, any work is open to interpretation and then linking such interpretations to the society at the time. Realistically, the problems arise in associating the correct interpretations to the words.

Employing “old historicism” as a means of contextualising a text has a number of obvious problems. To begin with, it does not take into account the wider context of society, that is, the ideologies and power structures in place at the time. Secondly, all it does take into account is the immediate background knowledge, such as who wrote it, the date it is written, its intended audience, and any other such immediate knowledge. Such a restricted approach leaves makes reading any literature as a historical document as any interpretations are based on information too broad to be specific, and often constrained to the provenance of the historical information available to a reader. The honesty of the author themselves may also affect the reliability of a given text as a historical document, as authors may have had ulterior motives for writing their works. Take for example the Romantic poet and writer Coleridge. He spent a large deal of his time promoting his works through prefaces, essays and venturing on reading tours, all in the effort of building up the profile of Romantic poetry. Such enthusiasm may have been tainted by the prospect of money, and so his words are unreliable.

Old historicism does however help to bring a text more narrowly into perspective, enabling the reader (in most cases) to attribute more refined and suitable symbolic meaning to a text. On its own, the method of giving immediate background knowledge may be limited, but it does allow the process of reading literature as a historical document to be carried further into the realms of “new historicism”, where it is argued that the best framework for interpreting literature is in relation to contemporary issues and anxieties. Considering a text from such a viewpoint engages the reader to think about “*the struggles that the text reflects, refracts, and tries to work through*” (Warren Hedges), thereby opening up new avenues of meaning and inference on behalf of the reader. Any piece of literature which causes the audience to pose questions about the society at the time, invoking thoughts and theories on the ideologies and maybe even the politics set in place in the novel is an indication that the text is being read not only as literature but also as a historical document. However, it has been argued that the most prominent downside to the alternative method of new historicism can reduce literature to a mere footnote history, ignoring some of the finer unique qualities of the work itself.

We as an audience occupying our own current society naturally attempt extrapolate our experiences to those set out in a text, in order to rationalise and make sense of the text itself. Sinfield argues that “*the conditions of plausibility are therefore crucial*” in relation to his analysis of the story behind Othello and how the audience automatically interpret the politics behind Shakespeare’s Venetian society and he continues “*...they govern our understandings of the world and how to live in it, thereby seeming to define the scope of feasible political change*”. Yet, in doing this, the interpretation for each individual is ultimately different as different people may have experienced different socio-economic lifestyles. From this comes one of the biggest problems for reading literature as a historical document and claiming it to be accurate.

Internalisation of organised meaning in literature poses a major problem when interpreting literature as historical documents. Seeing as images and narratives form a lot of the important “*cultural work*” (Warren Hedges) of new historicist criticism, the subjective process of tying symbolism and imagery to the words of a text may lead to the reader misinterpreting the semantics of the text thereby creating a false opinion of the power structure and ideologies of the time the work was written. Some would even argue that images and meanings cannot be picked out of a work of literature “*That in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated. That form is meaning*” (Cleanth Brooks), and Jakobson would certainly argue that literature is defined not its meaning, but the words themselves that make up the text bit by bit, “*The object of study in literary science is not literature but ‘literariness’, that is, what makes a given work a literary work*”.

Yet another issue that must be taken into account when stating that to read a work of literature as literature is also to read it as a historical document, is that some literature, particularly poetry, is written in the way of defamiliarisation, that is, to make things strange and unfamiliar. The aim is to make the reader slow down and impede his/her progress by using new and interesting ways of writing, also including new word ordering, and rhythmic alteration to create a new lease of life for literary techniques which had been deadened over years of over-use. If one is trying to read a text as a

historical document, it is worthwhile bearing this formalism approach in mind, because it may serve to form the piece of literature into something other than a document useful to a reader as information to the past. Not only that, but the author may be trying to be so original in his defamiliarisation that it is almost impossible to attribute any accurate or reliable internalised meaning of imagery with which to judge and interpret the work as a historical document.

To read a piece of literature as literature is also to read it as a historical document. No matter the approach be it formalist or historicist, literature is written due reasons being associated with the author, and the events and circumstances surrounding them. Even if they have ulterior motives, or there is a cloud of mystery surrounding their lives, or when the text was written, even if they are attempting to defamiliarise the audience to the extent that the text seems so alien, it is nearly impossible to interpret, literature is always conveying something the society at the time. In a lot of cases however, this statement is not without problems. The literature as a historical document is problematic mainly because despite literature being somehow (no matter how obscurely) representative of society at the time, there is always the factor of subjectivity which will change the opinions of differing readers, often causing them to contradict and disagree with one another, making literature to pin down as a definite historical document very difficult.

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