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## UNIT 5 BEGINNINGS OF CULTURAL STUDIES AND NEW HISTORICISM

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- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 The Beginnings of Cultural Studies
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### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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Cultural Studies and New Historicism both mark a 'sociological turn' in literary studies. Sociological concerns were never absent from literary studies but these two trends bring them to the foreground. In this unit we shall give you some idea of the beginnings of these two trends. Section 5.2 will focus on the work of Raymond Williams and the Birmingham Centre and Section 5.3 will look at the work of Stephen Greenblatt, in particular New Historicism.

Matthew Arnold in the Victorian period and T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis in the twentieth century have also been 'culture critics' but our focus here is on cultural materialism as inaugurated by Raymond Williams.

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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The Birmingham Centre of Cultural Studies concerned itself with contemporary English reality and cultural forms (including film and mass media). New Historicism focused more on the Renaissance with special attention to drama. The 'Foreword' to the 1985 book *Political Shakespeare* edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield helps us to place these developments in better perspective. Dollimore tells us that the term 'Cultural Materialism' is borrowed from its recent use by Raymond Williams and that its practice grows from an eclectic body of work in Britain in the post-war period which can be broadly characterized as 'cultural analysis.' That work includes the impressive output of Williams himself and more generally comprises the convergence of history, sociology and English in Cultural Studies.

What is it that cultural critics wanted to achieve? The cultural critics wanted to break the boundary between high and popular culture and the hierarchy that this implies. The cultural critics are also critical of the idea of a "canon". Instead of evaluating what is "great", the cultural critics wished to relate a literary text to its cultural context. As such cultural criticism is interdisciplinary for it involves studying a whole way of life — which includes the social, the political, the economic etc.

Michel Foucault was a strong influence on cultural critics and the new historicists. He sought to study cultures in terms of power relationships. Unlike the Marxists, he refused to see power as something exercised by the oppressor on the oppressed. He did not see power simply as something repressive or oppressive of one against another. He saw it as a complex of forces — ways of thinking, speaking etc.

Foucault is also important for focusing on the histories of women, the minorities and other marginalised persons in the study of culture.

New Historicism, specifically, was more concerned with the interaction between state power and cultural forms in the Renaissance. Theatre came to be seen as a prime location for the representation and legitimization of power. Lately 'New Historicism' has come to cover a wide range of approaches to the study of literature and history. New Historicism was a reaction to the excesses of deconstruction and brought back the focus from the vagaries of the free-floating signifier to the dynamics of power within cultural formations.

There is considerable overlap between the concerns of the cultural critics and the New Historicists. According to Greenblatt, New Historicism involves "an intensified willingness to read *all* of the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts." The area of study goes beyond the literary to the non-literary of the same historical period and provides useful insights.

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## 5.2 THE BEGINNINGS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

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The Centre for Cultural and Community Studies was set up in Birmingham in 1964 and the names of Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall were associated with it. Raymond Williams had much to do with the founding (in 1964) of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies. Richard Hoggart's book *The Uses of Literacy* gave Cultural Studies a working class orientation. He 'read' everyday working class life, customs and habits as though they were literary texts. William's edict 'culture is ordinary' is at the heart of such a working-class orientation. The aestheticism, ahistoricism and apolitical position of groups like the New Critics were not seen in a favourable light by the Cultural Studies people.

Before looking at some crucial ideas of Williams, let us briefly look at some ideas of Dick Hebdige, a theorist of 'subculture'. His 1979 book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* concerns itself with the interconnected worlds of music, fashion and youth in the post-war period, especially the distinctive forms of clothing, speech and music that characterise groups like the punks. His interest was in the way young men and women resisted their assigned social roles through rituals of dress, dance and music. That provided a counterpart to the work routines of modern economic life. In this sense subcultures are a form of symbolic resistance to the pressures of living in capitalistic societies. Overthrowing the dominant culture is not as big a concern as seeking autonomy within it. Subculture thus comes to be a kind of distinctive clique within a larger social group.

Hebdige spells out his goals in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* in the following way:

Much of the available space in this book will be taken up with a description of the process whereas objects are made to mean and mean again as 'style' in subculture. As in Genet's novels, this process begins with a crime against the natural order, though in this case the deviation may seem light indeed – the cultivation of a quiff, the acquisition of a scooter, or a record or a certain type of suit. But it ends in the construction of a style in a gesture of defiance.. It signals a Refusal. I would like to think this Refusal is worth making (Hebdige in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, p.1066)

Hebdige sees these signs as 'just so much graffiti on the wall' but to him graffiti itself can make fascinating reading. What his book *Subculture* tries to do is to decipher the graffiti, to ease out the meanings embedded in various post-war youth styles.

The major figure from cultural studies, for our present purposes, is Williams. From the vast body of his work we shall take out and concentrate largely on his famous concept of 'structures of feelings'.

Williams' was a challenge to cultural elitism from within the tradition of 'English' criticism. His stress is on 'lived actuality' or on 'social experience in solution' as he phrases it on p.128 of *Marxism and Literature*. Meanings and values actually possess a great value in Williams's scheme of things. These have a way of binding people together in that they furnish them with meanings that go into the making of interpretive resources at their command as individual members of society. They help them to arrive at a sense of a number of matters by redefining their relationship with one another.

On page 63 of the *The Long Revolution*, Williams states:

I would then define the theory of culture as the study of the relationship between elements in a whole way of life. The analysis of culture is the attempt to discover the nature of the organization which is the complex of these relationships. Analysis of particular works or institutions is, in this, context, analysis of their essential kind of organization, ..... A key word in such analysis is pattern. It is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any cultural analysis begins, and with the relationships between these patterns which sometimes reveal unexpected identities and correspondences in hitherto separately considered activities, sometimes reveal discontinuities of an unexpected kind, that general cultural analysis is concerned. (p.63)

What Williams calls 'the living result' of all the elements in the general organization is precisely what gets reflected in his phrase 'structures of feeling'. These 'structures of feeling' are tied up with the belief that we are aware of our 'particular sense of life' and our 'particular community' when we notice the ways in which we are different from each other even as we participate in a common culture. It was Williams' firm belief that any adequate analysis of culture requires a detailed study not just of each element in it but of the organization which is 'the complex of these relationships'. But when one talks of 'the nature of the organization' it should not be something abstract but 'the nature of the organization' as experienced. Emphasis should be on 'the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization.'

William's concern is more with 'forming and formative processes' than with fixed explicit forms. A 'structure of feeling' is concerned with 'meanings and values as they are lived and felt' and are always in a process of forming and re-forming. As such they suggest a possibility for change and opposition to dominant ideologies. It differs from ideology because it is, in a sense, pre-ideological or could be in tension with the dominant ideology's more systematic formulations. The phrase 'structure of feeling' names the thoughts and feelings of a representative generation and is indicative of 'a very deep and wide possession'. It follows from this that a new generation will shape its response to changed circumstances in a changed 'structure of feeling'.

### 5.3 THE BEGINNINGS OF NEW HISTORICISM

The newness of 'New Historicism' is posited against the backdrop of 'historicist' works like E.M.W. Tillyard's 1943 book *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Where New Historicists go beyond Tillyard is in their view that there is no fixed 'history' which can be treated as the 'background' against which literature can be foregrounded. To New Historicists, historical periods are not unified entities so the question of there having been a single Elizabethan worldview does not arise.

New Historicists try to intervene in the canonical literary text, detaching it from the accumulated weight of literary scholarship and seeing it in a new light. The concern is not only with the 'historicity of texts' but also with the textual nature of history itself. The following statement about New Historicism made by Richard Dutton in the 'Introduction' to *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* is helpful:

It found the plays embedded in other written texts, such as penal, medical and colonial documents. Read within this archival continuum what they represented was not the harmony but the violence of the Puritan attack on Carnival, the imposition of slavery, the rise of patriarchy, the founding of deviance and the crashing of prison gates (p.8)

In this method of historical description an anecdote could well be 'read against' the orthodox history to reveal the codes of a given culture.

Since the beginning, New Historicism has moved in a number of directions so that today one can talk of new historicisms. We shall concentrate only on the beginnings, and with that goal in mind, we shall limit ourselves to Stephen Greenblatt with special reference to his 1980 work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. In this book, Greenblatt analyses the ways in which writers like Thomas More, William Tyndale, Thomas Wyatt, Edmund Spenser and Christopher Marlowe fashioned their self-identities through a network of social, psychological, political and intellectual discourses. A related argument is that in the Renaissance period there was a transformation in the social and cultural structures which changed the character of subjectivity. Thus when Greenblatt looks at Thomas More, he takes up More's identity, his representation and constructions of himself. More needed to be an astute political mover in the court and a genial family man at home. He was under a compulsion to embody the repressive, punitive powers of the state in public life and, at the same time, the Utopian father and husband in private life. To achieve this, he needed to fashion himself into different beings.

Greenblatt sees Shakespeare's plays as being centrally and repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder. He has a special interest in a dialectic of subversion and containment. In his famous essay 'Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion' he offers the thesis that subversiveness is necessary for power to become visible and fearsome. He extends his argument to suggest that seemingly orthodox texts generate subversive insights which are an integral part of a society's policing apparatus. In general Greenblatt has a special interest in how far Renaissance texts offer a genuinely radical critique of the religious and political ideology of their day and how far is literature, in its apparent subversive character, a way of containing subversive energies.

Two other critics need to be mentioned here. Jonathan Goldberg's reading of *Measure for Measure* and Louis Montrose's reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* give us a good idea of how New Historicists generally read Shakespeare. Goldberg discusses *Measure for Measure* in his 1983 book *James I and the Politics of Literature*. His argument is that the dominant trap in *Measure for Measure* is the unfolding of government, the revelation of the politicization that links public and

private spheres. Literature and power in Goldberg's view, are rooted in language. According to him Shakespeare's contribution to the Jacobean period is to establish that the language of literature and of royal power is a shared language. Goldberg's overall concern is the issue of representation as the common ground of literature and politics.

As for Louis Montrose, his essay 'Shaping Fantasies' takes as its subject the construction of a powerful mythical identity for Elizabeth I through narratives and dramas which played out the 'shaping fantasies' of Elizabethan culture. Montrose also takes up the Queen's projection of herself as mother of the nation and that needed to be seen along with her projection as a virgin who was openly flirtatious and provocative. Montrose notes that Elizabeth was precariously placed as a woman at the head of a strongly patriarchal society and her power involved a series of contradictions and complications. These needed to be manipulated and managed all the time both on a symbolic and a bureaucratic level.

We can thus see that the issue of power remains central to New Historicism. Literary texts, for New Historicists, have specific functions within a network of power-relations in society. H. Aram Veesser in the 'Introduction' to the 1989 book *The New Historicism* edited by him offers a neat summary of assumptions common to most New Historicist work. This common ground made New Historicists identifiable loosely as a group. The assumptions are:

- That every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices.
- That every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
- That literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably;
- That no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
- That the critical method and language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.

In short, New Historicism presents a decentreed history of cultural diversity. The only trouble is that it has also inherited Foucault's skeptical outlook on possibilities of social change.

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## 5.4 CONCLUSION

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A broad New Historicist orientation is no doubt a help in understanding the degree to which literature participates in forming the dominant ideological assumptions of a particular time. The main trouble with this tendency as a whole has been that texts could be subjected to the most superficial and generalized readings as a result of an interest in the function rather than the interpretability of texts. There is the danger of not having enough sensitivity of the complexity of literary texts. On the side of activism, the problem with New Historicism is that even when presenting a decentreed history open to cultural diversity it tends to inherit Foucault's more pessimistic idiom where questions of agency (the ability to bring about change) are not foregrounded sufficiently.

In this 'Conclusion' let us also touch upon the kind of criticism that Williams's view of 'culture' is vulnerable to. Terry Eagleton, in his 1975 book *Criticism and Ideology* voices it thus:

Williams' work, in the characteristic mode of the early New Left, tended to a dangerous conflation of productive modes, social relations, ethical, political and abstraction of 'culture'. Such a collapsing not only abolishes any hierarchy of actual priorities,

reducing the social formation to a 'circular' Hegelian totality and striking political strategy dead at birth, but inevitably over subjectivises that formation (p.26)

This is a little too harsh because Williams's endeavour was to describe a form of critical activity in the Marxist tradition that remains materialist but avoids the trap of attempting to understand all cultural activities as mere effects of the economic 'base'. He was able to move beyond the reductive base-superstructure relations which saw literature as an effect of an already existing economic reality.

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## 5.5 LET US SUM UP

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Raymond Williams's work is crucial to the beginnings of 'Cultural Studies' in Britain as they took shape in the Birmingham Centre. Towards the beginnings of New Historicism, the contribution of Stephen Greenblatt is noteworthy. In 'Cultural Studies' (Birmingham) the work of Dick Hebdige on 'subculture' is also significant. William's key notion is 'structures of feeling'. His accent was on 'lived experience'.

New Historicism was concerned with the 'historicity of texts' and the textuality of history' within some kind of archival continuum. A key Greenblatt text is *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. In general, the production and containment of subversion and disorder is a favourite Greenblatt theme. Readings of Shakespeare along these general lines were taken up by critics like Goldberg and Montrose.

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## 5.6 QUESTIONS

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1. What is Raymond Williams's contribution to the beginning of Cultural Studies at Birmingham?
2. What does Dick Hebdige concentrate on in his analysis of "subculture"?
3. Write a short note on 'structures of feeling' as spelt out by Raymond Williams.
4. What kind of relation between literature and power is put forward by Stephen Greenblatt?

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## 5.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, London: Verso, 1976.

Stephen Greenblatt *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Methuen, 1979.

Richard Hoggart *The Uses of Literacy (1957)*. London: Penguin, 1971.

Louis Montrose "Shaping Fantasies, Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture" *Representations* 1:2, Spring, 1983.

Julie Riukin and Michael Ryan (eds.) *Literary Theory*. London: Blackwell, 1998.

Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore (eds) *Political Shakespeare*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.

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New Historicism**

H.Aram Veaser (ed). *The New Historicism*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Raymond Williams *The Long Revolution* Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1965.  
*Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

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## UNIT 6 LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORY : A SUMMING UP

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### Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Beginnings of criticism in English
- 6.2 Criticism in the eighteenth century
- 6.3 Romantic concerns in criticism and the nineteenth century emphases
- 6.4 Emergence of modernist thought around the First World War
- 6.5 Modernist criticism and New Criticism
- 6.6 Structuralism and Poststructuralism
- 6.7 Deconstruction as an approach
- 6.8 Postmodernism and after
- 6.9 Marxism and feminism
- 6.10 The 'post' in postcolonialism
- 6.11 Conclusion

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### 6.0 OBJECTIVES

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This is the last Unit of your course. We hope you've understood the arguments presented by different critical theorists, discussed in the previous Blocks. In this Unit we only want to give you a summary of all the major critical concerns from Sir Philip Sidney down to the present. This will not only help you to recapitulate most of what you have done so far but it will also provide an overview of the tradition of literary criticism and theory as it has developed over the last few centuries.

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### 6.1 BEGINNINGS OF CRITICISM IN ENGLISH

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Sir Philip Sidney is one of the first critical voices in English seriously engaged with defining poetry in terms of beauty, meaning and human interest. His reference point was the Renaissance view of art that had necessitated an affirmation of non-medieval, secular art. More than half a century later, John Dryden probed in his criticism the question of heroic writing with a view to explaining the usefulness of "some instructive moral" in ancient classical writing. Dryden also explained some of the formal peculiarities of writing such as blank verse and rhyme and chose to introduce dignity or elevated thought through the use of the latter. However, English criticism till the eighteenth century was largely descriptive and self-justificatory.

As we understand, literary criticism or criticism of literature evolved from the practice of explaining, analysing, discussing or simply talking about plays, poems, novels. This implies that at a certain point of time, writing posed difficulties to the common reader and needed elucidation by an expert. At the same time, literary writing tended to influence ordinary people's behaviour by offering comment on the principles governing their lives. In many a situation, literary work became controversial and invited censure. Writers as such supported or opposed social interests through their writings and for that reason became prone to attacks from powerful sections in society. This was the case, for instance, in the seventeenth century England in the wake of great social upheavals. The example that comes to mind is the English Civil War, preceded by intense parliamentary debates and followed by divisions in opinion about the desirability of Restoration. How could literature remain touched by such developments?