

## PREFACE

In the curricular structure introduced by this University for students of Post-Graduate degree programme, the opportunity to pursue Post-Graduate course in Subjects introduced by this University is equally available to all learners. Instead of being guided by any presumption about ability level, it would perhaps stand to reason if receptivity of a learner is judged in the course of the learning process. That would be entirely in keeping with the objectives of open education which does not believe in artificial differentiation.

Keeping this in view, study materials of the Post-Graduate level in different subjects are being prepared on the basis of a well laid-out syllabus. The course structure combines the best elements in the approved syllabi of Central and State Universities in respective subjects. It has been so designed as to be upgradable with the addition of new information as well as results of fresh thinking and analyses.

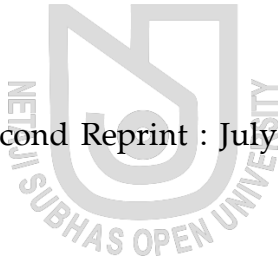
The accepted methodology of distance education has been followed in the preparation of these study materials. Co-operation in every form of experienced scholars is indispensable for a work of this kind. We, therefore, owe an enormous debt of gratitude to everyone whose tireless efforts went into the writing, editing and devising of a proper lay-out of the materials. Practically speaking, their role amounts to an involvement in invisible teaching. For, whoever makes use of these study materials would virtually derive the benefit of learning under their collective care without each being seen by the other.

The more a learner would seriously pursue these study materials the easier it will be for him or her to reach out to larger horizons of a subject. Care has also been taken to make the language lucid and presentation attractive so that may be rated as quality self-learning materials. If anything remains still obscure or difficult to follow, arrangements are there to come to terms with them through the counselling sessions regularly available at the network of study centres set up by the University.

Needless to add, a great part of these efforts is still experimental—in fact, pioneering in certain areas. Naturally, there is every possibility of some lapse or deficiency here and there. However, these do admit of rectification and further improvement in due course. On the whole, therefore, these study materials are expected to evoke wider appreciation the more they receive serious attention of all concerned.

**Joydeep Sil**  
Acting Vice-Chancellor

Second Reprint : July, 2008



---

Printed in accordance with the regulations and financial assistance of  
the Distance Education Council, Government of India

**POST-GRADUATE : ENGLISH**  
**[PG : ENG.]**

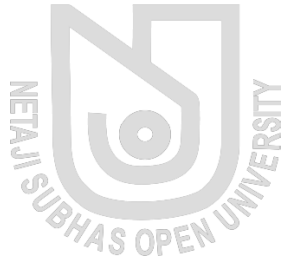
**Paper - V**  
**Module - 4**

	<i>Course Writing</i>	<i>Editing</i>
Unit 1	Tirthankar Chatterjee	D. Das
Unit 2	"	"
Unit 3	Saibal Chatterjee	S. Mahalanobish
Unit 4	"	"
Unit 5	"	T. Chatterjee
Unit 6	Tania Chakraverty	S. Mahalanobis

**Notification**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from Netaji Subhas Open University.

**Joydeep Sil**  
*Registrar*





**NETAJI SUBHAS  
OPEN UNIVERSITY**

**Post Graduate  
Course in English  
PG-English-V**

**MODULE  
4**



<b>Unit - 1</b>	<b>Structuralism</b>	<b>...</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Unit - 2</b>	<b>Deconstruction</b>	<b>...</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Unit - 3</b>	<b>Neo Historicism</b>	<b>...</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Unit - 4</b>	<b>Cultural Materialism</b>	<b>...</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Unit - 5</b>	<b>Marxist Criticism</b>	<b>...</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Unit - 6</b>	<b>Feminist Criticism</b>	<b>...</b>	<b>66</b>



## PAPER-V    MODULE-4

---

### Unit - 1    Structuralism

---

#### Structure

#### 1.0. Structuralism

#### 1.1. Langue and Parole

#### 1.2. Phonemes

#### 1.3.1. What is Structuralism ?

#### 1.3.2. What is Semiology / Semiotics ?

#### 1.1.3. Structuralism and Semiology

#### 1.1.4. What happens when Structuralism is applied to Literature.

#### 1.1.5. Merits of Structuralist literary criticism.

#### 1.1.6. Limitations of Structuralism

---

### 1.0    Structuralism

---

Structuralism is a theory which is not applied to literature alone. It is applied to all elements of human culture. Before trying to arrive at a kind of working definition of Structuralism it is good to know that it was heavily influenced by linguistics. The beginnings of this theory are associated with the works of a Swiss linguist called Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). It is useful to start with certain terms used by Saussure in studying Linguistics.

---

### 1.1    Langue and Parole

---

Saussure, during his last years of teaching at the Geneva University, taught a course of General Linguistics which proved to be very influential later. After his death, two of his students reconstructed his lecture notes and other material and published them in book form. The French book was later translated into English as *Course in General Linguistics* (1916).

The main thrust of Saussure's Linguistics was not on the history of languages but on the study of language as a system. Saussure argued that unless words existed within a system, we would not understand them. We understand them by marking their difference from other words. For example, we understand what a 'bill' is because we understand that it is not a 'receipt' or a 'cash memo' or 'paper' or a 'card' or a 'pen'. In different context, a 'bill' is a part of a bird's body, but not its legs or eyes etc. A similar speech-sound within a different system (bill) means a water-body other than a canal, a river etc.

Saussure, therefore, considers words as speech-sounds. The meaning of a word is arbitrary. We understand it because we can relate it to, and differentiate it from, other speech-sounds in the system. A speech-sound is a sign pointing to these relations and differences.

The linguistic system which you study in order to determine the network of relations and differences was called *la langue* by Saussure.

The specific speech-acts or utterances were called *la parole*. You use your knowledge of the *langue* to make the *parole* possible. Unless you are familiar with the system, you cannot use or understand the parole.

### **What have we learnt so far?**

Saussure, a Swiss linguist, was one of the pioneers of Structuralism.

Saussure considered language as a network of relations and differences.

The relations and differences are among speech-sounds within the network. Each speech-sound is a sign pointing at those relations and differences.

Meanings are arbitrary. The same speech-sound may stand for a different meaning in a different system.

Langue = the system/the network.

Parole = particular speech-act/utterance within the langue.

---

## **1.2 Phonemes**

---

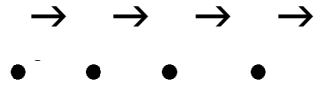
Diachronic and Synchronic Relationship among Phonemes.

A phoneme is the smallest basic speech-sound, the smallest unit of pronunciation.



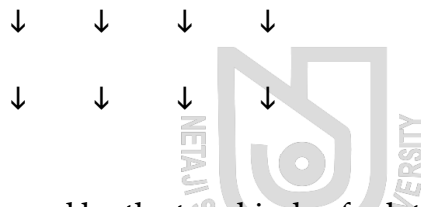
Phonemes, according to Saussure, exist in two kinds of relationship : diachronic and synchronic.

A phoneme is related to other phonemes proceeding or following it. See below :



This is a diachronic or “horizontal” relationship among phonemes. This occurs in a parole (*i.e.* in a particular utterance/usage).

But a phoneme is also in a synchronic or “vertical” relationship with the entire langue within which different paroles have meanings. As below :



The network formed by the two kinds of relationships is the system which relates all parts of language. These parts, as seen before are different speech-sounds. As also noted above, these speech-sounds are signs. A language, according to this view, is a network of signs.

We have reached a point in our discussion where we are dealing with a study of systems and a study of signs. The two studies, though interrelated, have been given two different names : Structuralism and Semiology (or Semiotics).

---

### 1.3.1 What is Structuralism?

---

Structuralism is a study of humankind in which the structures or systems of relations among cultural objects (including literature) are defined and distinguished from one another.

---

### 1.3.2 What is Semiology/Semiotics ?

---

Semiology studies cultural objects as signs pointing to meanings.

**1.3.3. Structuralism and Semiology**, taken together, tells us : (a) social and cultural phenomena do not have essences/essential meanings, but are defined by a network of relations ;

(b) In so far as these phenomena (*e.g.* literature) have meanings, they are signs.

---

### **1.1.4 What happens when Structuralism is applied to Literature?**

---

Structuralist poetics stands to literature as linguistics stands to language. Structuralism is not concerned with meaning or significance. It is primarily concerned with how literature is 'made', is 'constructed' : how the signs involved in a poem or a narrative are related 'vertically' or 'horizontally' to other signs and how these relationships make a structure. That is to say, images in a poem or characters in a story do not have an 'essential' meaning ; they only have a 'relational' meaning. Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory : An Introduction* explains this with an example cited below.

Suppose we are analysing a story in which a boy leaves home after quarrelling with his father, sets out on a walk through the forest in the heat of the day and falls down a deep pit. The father comes out in search of his son, peers down the pit, but is unable to see him because of the darkness. At that moment the sun has risen to a point directly overhead, illuminates the pit's depths with its rays and allows the father to rescue his child. After a joyous reconciliation, they return home together.

This may not be a particularly gripping narrative, but it has the advantage of simplicity. Clearly it could be interpreted in all sorts of ways. A psychoanalytical critic might detect definite hints of the Oedipus complex in it, and show how the child's fall into the pit is a punishment he unconsciously wishes upon himself for the rift with his father, perhaps a form of symbolic castration or a symbolic recourse to his mother's womb. What a structuralist critic would do would be to schematize the story in diagrammatic form. The first unit of signification, 'boy quarrels with father', might be rewritten as 'low rebels against high'. The boy's walk through the forest is a movement along a horizontal axis, in contrast to the vertical axis 'low /high', and could be indexed as 'middle'. The fall into the pit, a place below ground, signifies 'low' again, and the zenith of the sun 'high'. By shining into the pit, the sun has in a sense stooped 'low', thus inverting the narrative's first signifying unit, where 'low' struck against 'high'. The reconciliation between father and son restores an equilibrium between 'low' and 'high', and the walk back home together, signifying 'middle', marks this achievement of a suitably intermediate state.

Flushed with triumph, the structuralist rearranges his rulers and reaches for the next story.

Thus a structuralist reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* might show that the war between God and the angels in revolt is a rift between God and the fallen man, between virtue and sin. The rift is healed by the son of God.

In such a structural analysis, we find that sign systems are often understood in terms of binary oppositions. These opposite terms are finally reconciled by an intermediary third term (e.g. the reconciliation between father and son and that between God and man in the above examples).

---

### **1.1.5 Merits of Structuralist literary criticism :**

---

(a) It demystified literature. Much of literary criticism was loosely subjective before structuralism came to be applied to literature from the late nineteenth-sixties. With its appearance, literary work came to be recognized as a 'construct' whose mechanisms could be analyzed and classified like the objects in a science.

(b) Structuralist criticism showed that meaning was not a private experience or a divine ordinance, but the product of a shared system of relations and differences. Meaning was not something fixed or settled; it depended on what the speech-act shared with the system to which it belonged. Here there were seeds of a social and historical theory. However, structuralism was unable to develop these possibilities.

---

### **1.1.6 Limitations of Structuralism :**

---

(a) Structuralism makes no difference between 'great' and 'trivial' literature, since deep structures can be dug out of both cheap thrillers and Shakespeare's plays. The method pays no heed to the cultural value of the object.

(b) It does not care for the 'common-sense view' or the 'obvious' meaning of a story. It seeks to isolate underlying structures instead of surface meanings. The next is turned into ('displaced') a different kind of object.

(c) Through this displacement, the structure becomes the content. Thus, the narrative is about itself. The internal relations of the narrative becomes its subject-matter. No other sense, artistic or historical or social can be demanded from the story.

---

## Unit - 2 Deconstruction

---

### 2.0. Deconstruction

#### 2.1. What is Logocentrism and why does Derrida challenge it.

#### 2.2. What is Deconstruction

#### 2.3. American Deconstructionists and New Criticism

#### 2.4. Critical Observations

#### 2.5.1. Essay-type Questions

#### 2.5.2. Short Questions

---

## 2.0 Deconstruction

---

Deconstruction is a mode or way of studying philosophy and literature rather than a theory of philosophy or aesthetics. The beginning of this mode is associated with the works of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) : *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), *Writing and Difference* (1967), *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Dissemination* (1972).

Deconstruction arose as a response to Structuralism and New Criticism. Structuralism related cultural objects (including literature) to a system of signs, rejecting any essential meaning (see 4.1.31, 4.1.32 and 4.1.33 above). Poststructuralism and Deconstruction are not synonymous. But among many kinds of Poststructuralist responses or challenges to Structuralism, Deconstruction is probably the most influential.

Derrida rejects the frequent use of binary oppositions (see 4.1.4) in Structuralist criticism ( e.g. beginning/end , high/low , conscious/unconscious, presence/absence). He suggests that these oppositions imply hierarchies. One of the terms in a pair is considered by Western culture to be positive or superior; the other term is regarded as negative or inferior or at least slightly negative. Deconstruction is a method which aims at the erasing of the boundaries between binary oppositions. In doing so, Derrida also challenges the hierarchies implied by them.

Deconstruction, then, criticises not only Structuralism but also Western culture itself. His basic criticism is stated in the following passage in *Of Grammatology* :

[In Western and notably French thought, the dominant discourse—let us call it ‘structuralism’—remains caught, by an entire layer, sometimes the most fecund, of its stratification, within .... metaphysics—logocentrism.]

It is clear from this that Derrida challenges Structuralism in particular and Western thought in general because he wants to remove metaphysics and establish some kind of material philosophy.

---

## **2.1 What is Logocentrism and Why Does Derrida Challenge it?**

---

‘Logos’ is the Greek term for ‘word’ or ‘truth’ or ‘reason’. Logocentrism is that belief which holds that truth resides in the word. This belief gives rise to a contradiction between ‘speech’ and ‘writing’, speech being placed above writing in the implied hierarchy. It is as if writing obliterates or bypasses the meaning held by speech. Derrida calls this theory and its development the ‘metaphysics of presence’. Such metaphysics, such logocentrism, is committed to a belief in some ultimate ‘word’, essence, truth, reality. This ultimate presence acts as the foundation of all language and experience.

Derrida is against this ‘metaphysics of presence’, a first principle or foundation upon which a whole hierarchy of meanings may be constructed. He thinks that these first principles may be ‘deconstructed’. Instead of defining these first principles by what they exclude, deconstruction brings the excluded or undermined part of the binary opposition into operation to call the first principles into question. For example, in male-dominated societies, man is the founding principle, and woman is the excluded opposite, the ‘other’. As long as the distinction is held in place, the society/system can function effectively. Deconstruction shows that man (the ‘masculine’) is what he is only by always shutting out this ‘other’, the woman, the ‘feminine’. Man’s own being is not understood unless the ‘other’ is taken into cognisance. Deconstruction thus undermines, partly or wholly the opposition between binaries by erasing the boundary between them.

---

## **2.2. What is Deconstruction?**

---

Deconstruction is the name given to the critical operation by which binary oppositions can be shown partly to undermine each other in the process of textual meaning.

Deconstruction makes the point that binary oppositions represent a way of seeing typical of ideologies. Ideologies like to draw rigid boundaries between what they accept and what they do not : between self and non-self, truth and falsity, reason and madness, central and marginal. Deconstruction shows how,

to hold the opposition in place, a text relegates a detail to the margin ; if that detail is brought to the centre of discussion, the opposition collapses, the text contradicts itself. Deconstruction focuses exactly on those details. They are called the *aporia* or impasses of meaning.

So far we have seen only the challenge posed by Deconstruction against Structuralism. But how does it respond to New Criticism?

---

### **2.3 American Deconstructionists and New Criticism**

---

New Criticism (see Module 3, Unit 3) assumes that a work of literature is freestanding, self-contained object. If you can analyse the relations between its various parts (allusions, images, sound-effects etc.) you discover the underlying unity. Even ambiguities serve a definite purpose in this unified whole.

A deconstructive reading, however, focuses on a more radical ambiguity where nothing is resolved. It sees works of literature as being 'undecidable'. Deconstruction reveals many possibilities of a text but those possibilities are incompatible. It is impossible for the reader to decide among them. This kind of deconstruction is especially visible in the writings of American deconstructors (often called 'The Yale School') : Paul de man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom. Paul de Man was engaged in demonstrating that literary language constantly undermines its own meaning. Therefore, literature does not need to be deconstructed by the critic. It can be shown to have deconstructed itself. In fact, they consider this operation (self-deconstruction) to be the sole business of literature. As J. Hillis Miller says : "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself."

---

### **2.4 Critical Observation**

---

Deconstruction has been criticised for being too preoccupied with language and text ; ignoring the social context, just as formalism, its adversary, does. But it has also been argued that in attacking boundaries, it was not simply dismantling the logic of a particular system of thought but also exposing a system of political structures and social institutions which maintained its force by using that system of thought.

---

## 2.5.1 Short Questions

### 2.5.1. Essay-type Questions :

---

1. How does Deconstruction respond to binary oppositions ?
2. Explain why Deconstruction disagrees with New Criticism.
3. Is Deconstruction an aesthetic theory?
4. What is logocentrism?
5. Name some of the major figures in the Yale School of deconstruction.  
How do they abiguities in a text?



---

## **Unit - 3    Neo Historicism**

---

### **Structure**

- 3.0    Objectives**
- 3.1    New Historicism: The beginning**
- 3.2    What is New Historicism?**
- 3.3    Assumptions underlying the New Historical approach**
- 3.4    New Historicism : The Study**
- 3.5    Arguments of the New Historicists**
- 3.6    Comparison with Marxism**
- 3.7    Ideology**
- 3.8    Exponents of New Historicism**
  - 3.8.1    Stephen Greenblatt**
  - 3.8.2    Michel Foucault**
  - 3.8.3    Louis Montrose**
  - 3.8.4    Jonathan Goldberg**
  - 3.8.5    Clifford Geertz**
  - 3.8.6    Walter Benn Michels**
- 3.9    Charges against New Historicism**
- 3.10    Conclusion**
- 3.11    Review questions**
- 3.12    Bibliography (to be included)**



### **3.0 Objectives : The objective of this unit is to introduce you to :**

- \* the rise and growth of the New Historic movement**
- \* the basic assumptions of New Historicism**
- \* the contribution and influence of the major New Historicists**
- \* the present status of the New Historic movement**

---

### **3.1 New Historicism : The beginning :**

---

Let's first trace the rise and growth of the New Historical movement. New Historicism, as a contextual approach to literary criticism and literary theory, arose in the late 1970s and during the 1980s among some British and American critics. For several years, many scholars in English and American universities—ranging from Fredrick Crews, George Watson and E.D. Hirsch, on one end of the scale to Fredrick Jameson, Terry Eagleton and Frank Lentricchia on the other—had been raising a clamor for a return to historical scholarship in the academic study of literature. The historical nature of literary works, it was said, had been badly neglected over the past half century of Anglo-American criticism. The time had come to move beyond the narrowly 'formalistic' or 'text-centered' approach to literature and, in course of events, the new movement arose to meet the demand.

#### **New Historicism occurred mainly in response to :**

New Criticism's tendency to treat works of literature in a historical vacuum, as if a poem or novel had no relation to its historical context whatsoever.

Political developments in the 1960s, especially a desire on the part of literary critics to figure out how understanding literature might help in understanding social problems.

An influx of continental critics and literary theories into Britain and the United States.

Large number of literary persons being trained who came from other backgrounds—female, working class, Italian-American, and, increasingly, Asian American and Latino American.

New Historicist essays began appearing in the late 1970s, but the ground-breaking text was the 1980 publication of Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self*

*Fashioning : From More to Shakespeare*. This book was followed in 1983 by the founding of the journal *Representations*, initiated by Greenblatt and several of his colleagues at the University of Berkeley, where the journal is still published. In its volumes, and in Greenblatt's many subsequent publications, can most clearly be seen the strategies of New Historicism as well as their limitations.

---

### 3.2 What is New Historicism?

---

Emerging in reaction, against the successive ahistorical orthodoxies of New Criticism, Myth Criticism Deconstruction, the New Historicism draws upon post-structuralist theories of discourse, Marxist theories of ideology and the work of British literary historians and declares that a literary text can only be read with reference to the age in which it was written. A work of literature, as it holds, is not an ascendent document worthy of analysis, but only a representation of historical forces. It takes the social, cultural and the historical implications of the text and extends them to the economic and political contexts. All texts, according to New Historicism, are simply texts and works of literature are not given any special status because every kind of writing is the product of historical forces.

#### **New Historicists operate by fusing :**

New Historicists operate by fusing two key issues in criticism since the 1960s: the "linguistic turn" of poststructuralist and deconstructive criticism, and a return to historical readings. These two impulses are aptly summarised in Louis Montrose's often repeated catchphrase : "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history." Texts, he insists (as do all New Historicist critics) are embedded in particular histories. Those histories, in turn, are embedded in language, since we only access those histories through the texts which represent them. Since all these texts use language which is seen as elusive and unfixed, "textual" history effectively calls for the kinds of close reading strategies which, as Stephen Greenblatt remarks in a recent essay, literary critics have as part of their "disciplinary tool kit." In their choice of text events to analyze, and in their manner of analyzing those events, New Historicists develop many of their ideas by fusing the ethnography of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz with the philosophic history of Michel Foucault.

---

### 3.3 Assumptions underlying the New Historical critical approach :

---

Now, let's study the basic assumptions of New Historicism. The New Historicists contend—

1. “that there is no transhistorical or universal human essence and that human subjectivity is constructed by cultural codes which position and limit all of us in various and divided ways” (88).

Instead of the autonomous “self” or “individual”, these critics speak, of subject positions that are socially and linguistically constructed, created by various discourses of a given culture.

They are influenced by the work of the French theorist Michel Foucault, who focused upon the intricately structured power relations in a given culture at a given time to demonstrate how that society controls its members through constructing and defining what appear to be “universal” and “natural” truths.

They are skeptical toward any “universalizing” or “totalizing” claims, focusing rather on the specificities of a particular historical and cultural context.

2. “that there is no ‘objectivity’, that we experience the ‘world’ in language, and that all our representations of the world, our readings of texts and of the past, are informed by our own historical position, by the values and politics that are rooted in them.”

They emphasize the necessity for self-awareness on the part of the critic, who must be constantly aware of the difficulties of seeing the past except through the lenses and cultural constructs of the present.

3. “that representation ‘makes things happen’ by ‘shaping human consciousness’ and that, as forces acting in history, various forms of representation ought to be read in relation to each other and in relation to non-discursive ‘texts’ like ‘events’.”

Critics need to look not only at the historical causes of literary works, but also at their consequences.

In a process of **thick description**, they link literary works with many other cultural phenomena of a period, including the discourse of “popular culture” and of areas like economics, law, medicine, spolitics, etc.

New Historicism shares the above assumptions with what is often called **Cultural Studies**, but cultural critics are even more likely to emphasize the present implications of their study and to position themselves in opposition to current power structures, working to empower traditionally disadvantaged groups. Cultural critics also downplay the distinction between “high” and “low” culture and often focus particularly on the productions of “popular culture.”

---

### 3.4 New Historicism : The Study

---

New Historicist scholars begin their analysis of literary texts by attempting to look at what other texts—both literary and non-literary—a public could access at the time of writing, and what the author of the ‘original’ text might have read. They also, however, attempt to relate texts to the political and socio-economic circumstances in which they originated. For example, a well-known New Historicist reading examines the travellers’ tales and geographical works available to William Shakespeare about the discovery of the ‘New World’ and relates them to his play *The Tempest*. Therefore, this reading argues, we should interpret Shakespeare’s play less as a ‘timeless’ literary creation and more as a product of the context in which it appeared (see contextualism, thick description), and should see it as contributing to contemporary debates about colonialism.

In this shift of focus, a comparison can be made with the best discussions of works of decorative arts. Unlike fine arts, which had been discussed in purely formal terms under the influences of Bernard Berenson and Ernst Gombrich, since the 1970s nuanced discussion of the arts of design have been set within social and intellectual contexts, taking account of fluctuations in luxury trades, the availability of design prototypes to local craftsmen, the cultural horizons of the patron, and economic considerations—“the limits of the possible” in economic historian Fernand Braudel’s famous phrase.

Other than the belief that literature does not have trans-historic existence, that it ought not to be subjected to timeless criteria of value, and that therefore it should be read as history, there are certain other common beliefs that characterise New Historicism. The first is that history itself is not something homogeneous or stable. History itself is a network of interacting institutions, beliefs and cultural power-relations, practices and products. Literary texts, like all other texts, are not merely echoes of the dominant culture or ideology but also influence the existing culture and ideology, so that the relationship is symbiotic. They influence each other. The words used for such interaction are ‘negotiation’, ‘exchange’, ‘interaction’ and ‘circulation’.

New Historicism also considers the possession of social assets such as prestige equivalent to the possession of currency. The exchanges of these invisible assets are often ignored because they are not convertible into liquid assets. Thus, it is 'symbolic capital'. Just as the New Historicists contest the importance of materialism in literature, they also admit that they themselves cannot always make an adequate critique of the existing dominant ideology. Like the authors who produce the literary texts, the readers are themselves subject to the conditions and ideologies of their own era. If the ideology of the reader conforms to that of the text, he will 'naturalise' the text, that is, interpret the culture-specific and time-bound aspects as the features of universal and timeless human experience. If the ideology of the reader varies from that of the text, he will 'appropriate' the text, that is, make it conform to his own cultural possessions. The New Historical critic is therefore at risk of unquestioningly appropriating the texts written in the past. To reduce the possibility, they try to 'distance' and 'estrangle' an earlier text by emphasising the discontinuities and breaks in history.

---

### 3.5 Arguments of the New Historicists :

---

Now, the question that arises is—where do these assumptions lead the New Historicists?

The initial effort is to relocate the literary text among the other, traditionally nonliterary "discursive practices" of an age. The representation of character in the nineteenth-century novel, for instance, is said to be bound up with contemporary debates over parliamentary representation; or, Iago's plot against Othello is described as typical of Elizabethan attempts to deny the otherness of subject peoples. But the larger purpose of New Historicist inquiry is the reconstruction of the actual (as opposed to the "represented") relations in which people lived during a particular time. For example, in one of the most widely read essays by a New Historicist, Louis Adrian Montrose interprets *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an ideological attempt to comprehend the power of Queen Elizabeth—to make sense of it and place it safely within bounds—while simultaneously upholding the authority of males within Elizabethan culture. By citing a variety of contemporary writing (in order to reinstate the "discursive practices" of the age), Montrose demonstrates the Elizabethans' ambivalence toward their queen: abiding respect mixed with a dark desire to master her sexually. In this context, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is reread as a fable of the restoration of male governance. Mothers are significantly excluded from the *dramatis personae* of the play, just as the danger of matriarchy (with which the Elizabethans flirted in their fascination with the myth of the Amazons)

was quietly suppressed by the celebration of Elizabeth's virginity. The very real possibility that power might actually be passed from mother to daughter was concealed from women of the age by such cultural productions as Shakespeare's play, in which Elizabeth was a willing collaborator as much by her decision to remain unwed and barren as by her "cultural presence" within the play.

It is in this sense that works of literature such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are "representations" of the culture from which they emerge. They are the emanations, the active agents, of the culture's circumambient ideology. Literary works are both what a culture produces as well as what reproduces the ideology. The term "representations" is misleading insofar as it suggests a mimetic theory of literature. Nothing could be further from New Historicist truths. In fact, the New Historicism presumes that artistic fiction does not imitate human action, it mediates it. That is, fiction is defined as the lens through which a certain portrait of the human experience is brought into focus. And as mediation rather than as imitation of social practices, it can be thus be said to *shape* rather than to *reflect* an age's understanding of human experience and potentiality.

In New Historicist interpretation, as a consequence, history is not viewed as the cause or the source of a work. Instead, the relationship between history and the work is seen as a dialectic: the literary text is interpreted as both product and producer, end and source, of history. One undeniable side-benefit of such a view is that history is no longer conceived, as in some vulgar historical scholarship, as a thing wholly prior, a process which completes itself at the appearance of the work. At the same time, though, it must not be thought that the New Historicism dispenses with the cognitive category of priority. For the New Historicist it is ideology, not history, which is prior. The literary text is said to be a constituent part of a culture's ideology by virtue of passing it on; but the ideology nevertheless exists 'intact' intelligible, in a form separate from (and therefore prior to) the work. If it didn't, the critic could not discern a relationship between work and ideology; and if the ideology were not prior to the work, it wouldn't be a historical relationship.

But the apriorism of ideology in New Historicist thought raises large questions. The principal one is this: How does the critic know that the ideology located in the work of literature under discussion genuinely belongs to the past? How can he be sure that the ideology is not simply his own political sympathy which has been injected into the work and then "located" there by means of an ingenious selection of the evidence? These questions occur spontaneously to anyone who reads very widely in New Historicist writing, so much of which expresses a politically *au courant* sympathy for exploited

peoples, powerless women, workers, slaves, peasants. A critic like Stephen Greenblatt is too intelligent not to acknowledge that his own sympathy for such peoples is *a priori*. In the essay that launched the New Historicist journal *Representations*, Greenblatt interprets a Dürer sketch in *The Painter's Manual* (1525) for a monument commemorating a victory over rebellious peasants—a somewhat ludicrous design topped off by a peasant stabbed in the back—as ironic and subversive. § Greenblatt goes on to admit, though, that “[t]he bitter irony we initially perceived [in Dürer’s sketch] was constituted less by concrete evidence of Dürer’s subversiveness than by our own sympathy for the peasants, sympathy conditioned by our century’s ideology, by recent historical scholarship, and no doubt above all, by our safe distance from the fear and loathing of “1525.” He does not stop there, however. This admission, he continues, “though necessary, seems inadequate, for our solidarity with early sixteenth-century German peasants is of interest *only insofar as it seems to have been called forth by Dürer’s monument* and not simply read into it” (emphasis added). Yet how can the critic be certain that the work studied has not simply provided him with an occasion for a renewed outbreak of familiar feeling, like a pop song from our adolescence that reminds us of a girl we once ached for? Greenblatt passes silently over such a question. The real question for him “is how Dürer could have created a brilliant, detailed and coherent design that could lend itself to a strong interpretation so much at odds with his own probable intentions?” But this isn’t a scholarly question so much as it is a dilemma for a certain kind of scholar. For such a scholar (*i.e.*, one for whom the intentions of the artist are not normative), almost any work, no matter how brilliant, detailed and coherent, can be made to lend itself to almost any interpretation at all. For Greenblatt, the aim of scholarship is to square the artist’s intentions with the scholar’s own sympathy. He simply *assumes* that Dürer’s design is “at odds” with the sympathy any sensitive modern would feel. The sympathy is treated as a fact of equal importance (and comparable ontological status) with the design. No effort is made to ascertain whether the design really is at odds with anything; it is simply treated as a *donnee* of interpretation that it must be. The critic knows because of the way he feels.

---

### 3.6 Comparison with Marxism

---

Clearly in its historicism and its political interpretations, New Historicism owes something to Marxism; the fact remains that the central task of the New Historicism is the same as that of Marxist criticism: first to call into question the traditional view of literature as an autonomous realm of discourse with its own problems, forms, principles, activities and then to dissolve the literary

text into the social and political context from which it issued. In fact, the New Historicism tries explicitly to solve the theoretical difficulty in Marxist criticism of relating the cultural superstructure to the material base.

Whereas Marxism (at least in its cruder forms) tended to see literature as part of a 'superstructure' in which the economic 'base' (*i.e.* material relations of production) manifested itself, New Historicist thinkers tend to take a more nuanced view of power, seeing it not exclusively as class-related but extending throughout society. This view derives primarily from Michel Foucault. In its tendency to see society as consisting of texts relating to other texts, with no 'fixed' literary value above and beyond the way specific societies read them in specific situations, New Historicism also owes something to post-modernism. However, New Historicists tend to exhibit less skepticism than post-modernists, and show more willingness to perform the 'traditional' tasks of literary criticism: *i.e.* explaining the text in its context, and trying to show what it 'meant' to its first readers.

---

### 3.7 Ideology

---

New Historicist critics also place much emphasis on *power and power struggles*. The rationale is that the lowest common denominator for all human actions is power, so the New Historicist seeks to find examples of power and its disbursement in text. Power is a means through which the marginalized are controlled, and the thing that the marginalized (or, other) seek to gain. This relates back to the idea that because literature is written by those who have the most power, there must be details in it that show the views of the common people. New Historicists seek to find "sites of struggle" to identify just who is the group or entity with the most power. Relating to power in New Historicism is also contains the idea resurrected by Foucault of the panopticon, a theoretical prison system developed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham stated that the perfect prison/surveillance system would be a cylindrical shaped room that held prison cells on the outside walls. In the middle of this spherical room would be a large guard tower with a light that would shine in all the cells. The prisoners thus would never know for certain whether or not they were being watched, so they would effectively police themselves, and be as actors on a stage, giving the appearance of submission, although they are probably not being watched.

Foucault included this in his ideas about power to illustrate the idea of lateral surveillance, or self-policing, that occurs in the text when those who are not in power are made to believe that they are being watched by those who are. His purpose was to show that power would often change the behavior of the



subordinate class, and they would often fall into line whether there was a true need to do so or not.

Insofar as Greenblatt has been explicit in expressing a theoretical orientation, he has identified the ethnography and theoretical anthropology of Clifford Geertz as highly influential.

---

### 3.8 Exponents of New Historicism

---

Let's now study the works and influence of the exponents of New Historicism.

**3.8. Stephen Greenblatt:** It was Stephen Greenblatt who introduced the label 'New Historicism' in his introduction to a special volume of *Genre* (1982) on Renaissance writing and New Historicism itself can said to be have begun with the book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980). In his introduction to the volume of *Genre*, Greenblatt claimed that the articles, he had solicited were engaged in a joint enterprise, namely, an effort to rethink the ways that early modern texts were situated within the larger spectrum of discourses and practices that organized sixteenth-and seventeenth-century English culture. This reconsideration had become necessary because many contemporary Renaissance critics had developed misgivings about two sets of assumptions that informed much of the scholarship of previous decades. Unlike the New Critics, Greenblatt and his colleagues were reluctant to consign texts to an autonomous aesthetic realm that dissociated Renaissance writing from other forms of cultural production; and unlike the prewar historicists, they refused to assume that Renaissance texts mirrored, from a *safe* distance, a unified and coherent world-view that was held by a whole population, or at least by an entire literate class. Rejecting both of these perspectives, Greenblatt announced that a new historicism had appeared in the academy and that it would work from its own set of premises—that Elizabethan and Jacobean society was a site where occasionally antagonistic institutions sponsored a diverse and perhaps even contradictory assortment of beliefs, codes, and customs; that authors who were positioned within this terrain, experienced a complex array of subversive and orthodox impulses and registered these complicated attitudes toward authority in their texts; and that critics who wish to understand sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing must delineate the ways the texts they study were linked to the network of institutions, practices and beliefs that constituted Renaissance culture in its entirety.

In some ways, Greenblatt's declaration of New Historicism's existence was a problematic gesture, for while his title quickly garnered considerable prestige for critics working in this area, it also created expectations that the New Historicists could not satisfy. Specifically, the scholars who encountered

Greenblatt's term tended to conceive of New Historicism as a doctrine or movement, and their inference led them to anticipate that Greenblatt and his colleagues would soon articulate a coherent theoretical program and delineate a set of methodological procedures that would govern their interpretive efforts. When the New Historicists failed to produce such position papers, critics began to accuse them of having a disingenuous relation to literary theory. In response to such objections, Greenblatt published an essay entitled "*Towards a Poetics of Culture*" (1987), which has had a profound impact on the way academics understand the phenomenon of New Historicism today. In this piece, Greenblatt attempted to show, by way of a shrewd juxtaposition of *Jean-Francois Lyotard's* and *Fredric Jameson's* paradigms for conceptualizing capitalism, that the general question they address, namely, how art and society are interrelated, cannot be answered by appealing to a single theoretical stance. And since the question both Lyotard and Jameson pose is one that New Historicism also raises, its proponents should see the failure of Marxist and poststructuralist attempts to understand the contradictory character of capitalist aesthetics as a warning against any attempt to convert New Historicism into a doctrine or a method. From Greenblatt's perspective, New Historicism never was and never should be a theory; it is an array of reading practices that investigate a series of issues that emerge when critics seek to chart the ways texts, in dialectical fashion, both represent a society's behavior patterns and perpetuate, shape or alter that culture's dominant codes.

In his introduction to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), Greenblatt indicates that his book aims to chart the ways identity was constituted in sixteenth-century English culture. He argues that the scene in which his authors lived was controlled by a variety of authorities—institutions such as the church, court, family and colonial administration, as well as agencies such as God or a sacred book—and that these powers came into conflict because they endorsed competing patterns for organizing social experience. From Greenblatt's New Historicist perspective, the rival codes and practices that these authorities sponsored were cultural constructions, collective fictions that communities created to regulate behavior and make sense of their world; however, the powers themselves tended to view their customs as natural imperatives, and they sought to represent their enemies as aliens or demonic parodists of genuine order. Because human agents were constituted as selves at the moment they submitted to one of these cultural authorities, their behavior was shaped by the codes that were sponsored by the institution with which they identified and they learned to fear or hate the other that threatened.

Since authors were fully situated within this cultural system, Greenblatt contends that their writings both comment generally upon the political struggles

that emerged within the Tudor state and register their complicated encounters with authorities and aliens. To prove his thesis, he analyzes self-fashioning in a number of significant Renaissance works, and he shows that these texts record sophisticated responses to a series of cultural problems. Greenblatt demonstrates that Thomas More's late writings are the culmination of his engagement with theological controversy, for these letters reiterate his sense that his identity is shaped by his participation in the Catholic community, and they restate his belief that Protestant theology is an alien threat should be rooted out of England. Edmund Spenser's Bower of Bliss scene in *The Faerie Queene* encodes and relieves anxieties about the ways sexuality challenges the state's legitimate authority, and Thomas Wyatt's satires explore whether an aristocrat can detach himself from a court society that has become wholly corrupt.

By consistently situating the texts he studies in relation to sixteenth-century political problems, Greenblatt avoids the formalist error of consigning writing to an autonomous aesthetic realm and produces analyses that accord with the New Historicist premise that critics can understand Renaissance works only by linking them to the network of institutions, practices and beliefs that constituted Tudor culture in its entirety. And if one of the aims of cultural poetics is to explain how texts are both socially produced and socially productive, Greenblatt addresses this question directly in his chapter on William Tyndale. He argues there that the invention of the printing press converted books into a form of power that could control, guide and discipline, and he proves that texts fashioned acceptable versions of the self by narrating the story of James Bainham, that ultimate creation of the written word. Following John Foxe, Greenblatt recounts that when Bainham publicly declared his Protestant faith, he spoke with "the New Testament in his hand in English and the Obedience of a Christian Man in his bosom," and since the "Obedience" is the title of one of Tyndale's most influential moral tracts, Greenblatt concludes that Bainham's identity has been constituted by a text.

While Greenblatt's book distinctly advances the New Historicist project of rethinking the relationship between literature and society, it also investigates the other questions that Montrose uses to define cultural poetics. Since self-fashioning is a close analogue to Montrose's own idea of subjectification, it is clear that much of Greenblatt's attention is focused on the social processes by which identity is constituted. In his chapter on Christopher Marlowe's plays, Greenblatt also offers his views on the question whether literature can generate effective resistance, and he concludes that the political ideologies and economic practices that both Marlowe and his characters seek to contest are ultimately too powerful to subvert.

Finally, concerning Greenblatt's response to the questions of theory, it seems

fair to conclude that at the time he wrote *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* he had already decided that no single interpretive model could explain the full complexity of the cultural process New Historicism investigates. Although he invokes a vast array of approaches from a considerable number of disciplines, three of his theoretical borrowings are especially significant. Following Geertz, Greenblatt argues that every social action is embedded in a system of public signification, and this premise is responsible for one of the most spectacular features of his reading practice, namely, his ability to trace in seemingly trivial anecdotes the codes, beliefs, and strategies that organize an entire society. If cultural anthropology supplies Greenblatt with the techniques of thick description that he uses to interpret letters from colonial outposts, then Foucault offers him the theory of power that informs much of his work, for as his chapters on More and Tyndale demonstrate, Greenblatt views disciplinary mechanisms such as shaming, surveillance and confession as productive of Renaissance culture, not as repressive of innate human potential. Lastly, in poststructuralist criticism from the 1970s and 1980s, Greenblatt finds corroboration of his idea that the self is a vulnerable construction, not a fixed and coherent substance, though he deviates somewhat from deconstructive analyses when he argues that culture, rather than language, creates the subject's instability.

**3.8.2 Michel Foucault :** Many New Historicists have acknowledged a profound indebtedness to the writings of Michel Foucault. A French philosophical historian, Foucault's studies of madness, reason, discipline and punishment exercised huge influence through the 1970s and into the 1980s. Attention to *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) leads to a reading of texts for silences and exclusions"; *The Order of Things* (1966) suggests a search for 'epistemes'—unconscious, regulating structures that limit what can be written in any epoch; *Discipline and Punish* (1975) encourages a more political reading, one that stresses the power effects of discourse; volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality* (1976) sensitise the critic to the textual problematic of self-constitution. Again, like the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche Foucault refused to see history as an evolutionary process, a continuous development from cause to effect, from past to present toward THE END, a moment of definite closure, a Day of Judgment. No historical event, according to Foucault, has a single cause; rather, each event is tied into a vast web of economic, social and political factors. Like Karl Marx, Foucault saw history in terms of power, but unlike Marx, he viewed power not simply as a repressive force or a tool of conspiracy but rather as a complex of forces that produces what happens. Not even a tyrannical aristocrat simply wields power, for the aristocrat is himself empowered by discourses and practices that constitute power.

New Historicists shared with him many political experiences. Foucault had

witnessed the 1968 uprisings in Paris, and had seen the force of protest crushed by the power of the republic. Similarly, New Historicists were young, liberal teachers who witnessed the campus protests in the United States, and the crushing of those protests by federal and state forces. Greenblatt and Montrose began writing while Ronald Reagan was governor of California and Richard Nixon president of the United States. Their fascination with the symbolics of power, the invisible forces manifested in a street parade or a court masque, as well as with the brute force of power, reflect this combination of personal and intellectual experiences. Greenblatt and Montrose clearly projected their own anxieties into the European past. With Foucault to assist them, they saw not a golden age, as previous critics had done, but rather a dark mirror for their own troubled times.

The events of 1968 showed how forcefully states would seek, when threatened, to enforce their own power. What preoccupied Foucault and his New Historicist followers was not so much the defeat of “freedom fighters” but rather the capacity of the state to withstand such urgent challenges. Why had the populace not risen to support the students and workers in Paris? The answer was provided partly by Foucault and partly by the French political philosopher Louis Althusser. The state’s control of its citizenry was internal rather than external. The state subjected its peoples by creating them as subjects, devising fixed categories under which people could be described and thus controlled. This was the conjunction Foucault evoked as “power/knowledge.” The categories sane/insane, homosexual/heterosexual, male/female, slave/freed could thus be used to proscribe activity. This would happen not with regulation but with more invisible forms of ideological pressure, through institutions, literature, entertainments. The populace would have the illusion of being free to choose their status and activities; in fact they would be in thrall to an omnipresent state. For many, Foucault thus made sense of the complexity of capitalist societies, saturated with media events and spectacles of pleasure. In turn he offered New Historicists insight into the complex workings of Renaissance monarchies. Renaissance England, it seemed to them, was as beset by chaos, by enemies within and without, as the contemporary world. How could you effectively, rule such turmoil? Their explanations projected Elizabeth I as a cunning constructor of images of herself and her kingdom, purveying fictions of splendour as well as propaganda to her people. Underneath the theatrical charisma, her regime was harsh and oppressive. Rebellion might be attempted but effectively would be impossible. Renaissance writers were thus trapped in subtle webs of power politics, just as New Historicists felt themselves trapped by what Althusser calls “Ideological State Apparatuses”.

**3.8.3 Louis Montrose :** Louis Montrose in his essay, *The Poetics and Politics*

*of Culture* (1986), provides list of concerns shared by New Historicists that agrees with and extends Greenblatt's commentary. Like Greenblatt, Montrose insists that one aim of New Historicism is to refigure the relationship between texts and the cultural system in which they were produced, and he indicates that as a first step in such an undertaking, critics must problematize or reject both the formalist conception of literature as an autonomous aesthetic order that transcends needs and interests and the reflectionist notion that writing simply mirrors a stable and coherent ideology that is endorsed by all members of a society. Having abandoned these paradigms, the New Historicist, he argues, must explain how texts not only represent culturally constructed forms of knowledge and authority but actually instantiate or reproduce in readers the very practices and codes they embody.

Montrose also suggests that if New Historicism calls for a rethinking of the relationship between writing and culture it also initiates a reconsideration of the ways authors specifically and human agents generally interact with social and linguistic systems. This second New Historicist concern is an extension of the first, for if the idea that every human activity is embedded in a cultural field raises questions about the autonomy of literary texts, it also implies that individuals may be inscribed more fully in a network of social practices than many critics tend to believe. But as Montrose goes on to suggest, the New Historicist hostility toward humanist models of freely functioning subjectivity does not imply that he and his colleagues are social determinists. Instead, Montrose argues that individual agency is constituted by a process he calls "subjectification," which he describes as follows: on the one hand, culture produces individuals who are endowed with subjectivity and the capacity of agency; on the other, it positions them within social networks and subjects them to cultural codes that ultimately exceed their comprehension and control.

In another section of his essay, Montrose adds a third concern to define New Historicism: to what extent can a literary text offer a genuinely radical critique of authority, or articulate views that threaten political orthodoxy? New Historicists have to confront this issue because they are interested in delineating the full range of social work that writing can perform, but as Montrose suggests, they have not yet arrived at a consensus regarding whether literature can generate effective resistance. On one side, critics such as Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield claim that Renaissance texts contest the dominant religious and political ideologies of their time; on the other, some critics argue that the hegemonic powers of the Tudor and Stuart governments are so great that the state can neutralize all dissident behavior. Although Montrose offers his own distinctive response to the containment-subversion problem, he insists that a willingness to explore the political potential of writing is a distinguishing mark of New Historicism.

A final problem Montrose expects his New Historicist colleagues to engage might be called “the question of theory.” Even as he insists that cultural poetics is not itself a systematic paradigm for producing knowledge, he argues that the New Historicists must be well versed in literary and social theory and be prepared to deploy various modes of analysis in their study of writing and culture. Montrose finds notions of textuality from Deconstruction and poststructuralism to be particularly useful for the practice of historical criticism, for their emphasis on the discursive character of all experience and their position that every human act is embedded in an arbitrary system of signification that social agents use to make sense of their world allow him and his colleagues to think of events from the past as texts that must be deciphered. In fact, these poststructuralist theories often underlie the cryptically chiasmic formulations, such as “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history,” that appeal so much to the practitioners of cultural poetics.

**3.8.4 Jonathan Goldberg:** In his introduction to *James I and the Politics of Literature* (1983), Jonathan Goldberg commends Greenblatt’s study of the relationship between Renaissance texts and society, and he claims that his book, like Greenblatt’s, will reveal “the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text” (Goldberg, *James xv*, quoting Greenblatt, *Renaissance* 5). But unlike Greenblatt who analyzes the techniques that a number of competing institutions use to discipline behavior, Goldberg tends to focus on the ways political discourses circulate around a single authority, James I. According to Goldberg, James’s Roman rhetoric is filled with contradictions, two of which are especially important. First, while James wishes to maintain the integrity of the royal line from which he descends, he also claims that he is both self-originating and the world’s secret animating force. Second, while James refers to kingship as a kind of performance in which his thoughts are fully revealed, he also characterizes public display as necessarily obfuscating and opaque.

In a characteristically New Historicist manner, Goldberg offers a political interpretation of these inconsistencies and he then proceeds to demonstrate that artistic productions replicate the structures of royal authority. Goldberg claims that James’s emphasis on self-origination is an effort to mystify his body, to free himself from his dubious family history and to derive his sovereignty from a transcendent and eternal world. This strategy allows the king to claim that all life springs from his spiritual substance, but it also enables him to argue that he is unaccountable to the social world he governs. While the king used this doctrine of mystery and state secrecy to protect his political power, Renaissance writers appropriated his language to make sense of their own

activities and experiences. *Ben Jonson* appeals to the theory of *arcana imperii* in his masques because he wants them to point beyond themselves to the royal patron who is responsible for their existence. John Donne uses James's terms to represent the undiagnosable disease that festers within him as an undisclosed policy that governs a newly founded kingdom. If the discourse of the state secret infiltrates the body here, it also pervades the Renaissance conception of the family, for in an astonishing analysis of domestic portraits, Goldberg shows that the father, modeled on royal authority, generates his lineage but remains distant and unaccountable as he dreamily gazes away from his wife and children.

From even this brief summary, we see that Goldberg shares many of the enabling assumptions of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*; he senses that all human activity is inevitably inscribed in a system of signification that organizes the ways agents understand their world; he views Renaissance literature as being inextricably related to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century social practices; and he conceives of the self as a culturally constituted entity that is shaped by structures of authority. The above account also hints that Goldberg's theoretical orientation is heavily Foucauldian, for his description of the ways the body is inscribed within discourse echoes Foucault's notion that disciplinary mechanisms swarm and produce their subtle effects even in the domains of Human experience that seem intensely private and personal.

But how does Goldberg respond to the containment-subversion problem, which is consistently investigated in New Historicist writing? We can answer this question by briefly summarizing the argument of his chapter "The Theatre of Conscience." Goldberg here examines the ways Renaissance texts replicate the second contradiction inherent in James's discourse, and he begins by suggesting that George Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* and William Shakespeare's *Henry V* both depict characters who gain authority by using performative arts to conceal their plans and desires. But if these works concur with James's sense that power can only be maintained through opaque self-dramatization, other texts invoke the royal rhetoric of obfuscating theatricality to challenge the king's policies. Writers such as Jonson and Donne confidently satirize the tolerated licentiousness of James's court because they recognize that if the monarch is aloof, unknowable and unaccountable, then poets can never say anything that intentionally questions royal motives. And if the censor or the king himself raises doubts about an author's loyalty, that writer can always cloak himself in the language of regal inscrutability and claim that his works, like James's acts, were constantly being misread. Goldberg's point, then, is that subversive behavior emerges *from within* absolutist discourse itself, and he implies that while such a structure allows writers to express feelings of disgust and contempt,



it also ultimately contains the threat posed by gestures of dissent and rebellion.

Goldberg's work has helped to convince many Renaissance scholars that they should become practitioners of cultural poetics, and as a result New Historicism thrives in the field of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English criticism.

**3.8.5 Clifford Geertz :** Geertz's ethnography became celebrated in the late 1960s, just as the major New Historicists were moving from graduate school into university posts. His writings have been enormously influential on New Historicist practice, especially the essays collected in *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays* (1973) and *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (1983). From the first, New Historicists were beguiled by the much anthologized "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cock Fight" (1971); and from the second, by "Centers, Kings and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power" (1983), especially by the section evoking the pageantry which Queen Elizabeth I of England deployed with great political skill. Here Geertz showed literary critics how they might read Renaissance English culture in new ways. With Geertz as their great exemplar. New Historicists have completely changed criticism of Renaissance texts; those changes can now also be seen in the criticism of texts from many different periods and national cultures.

Geertz practices "thick description," a term he borrows from the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Geertz "thickly describes"—in other words, unearths the underlying meaningful structures of—local events and local interactions, and from those interactions generalizes whole societies. For Geertz the concrete or the actual must always precede the abstract. He insists on what Greenblatt calls "the touch of the real." New Historicists were excited by the advantage Geertz offered them: his ethnography always focused on what had actually happened. He spun these happenings in elegant webs of significance; he turned them into elaborately constructed fictions. But their "touch of the real" meant that, in a crucial sense, they were more "real" than the literary fictions which New Historicists had been trained to describe: plays, poems and novels. They yearned to link those fictions with the world Geertz and his subjects seemed to inhabit. Geertz might describe a cockfight, a Moroccan bazaar, an Islamic ritual: his eye would light on an apparently small object or event and through thick description evoke its meanings.

He, thus, showed New Historicists how they could read; the advantage he offered them was an enormous expansion in the range of materials they might then read. If all events were accessed through texts, critics need not confine themselves to traditional literary and canonical texts.

A standard New Historicists essay would begin by reading an explorer's

journal, an account of an exorcist, or perhaps some gossip from the court of Henry VIII or Elizabeth I. This would be read as thoroughly as, say, New Criticism might read a Shakespearean sonnet. This would then be linked with other excerpts, from quite different texts. Finally the New Historicist, in a standard move, would turn to a literary example, usually a small passage or a scene from a play. There would be no attempts at a complete, or “closed,” reading of the text. Rather, the strategy would be to link together, somewhat loosely, a whole series of apparently unrelated items. From these readings the New Historicist would, like Geertz, then attempt to generalize the workings of a society.

**3.8.6 Walter Benn Michaels:** In his introduction to *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987) has used New Historicist assumptions to interpret texts drawn from a later culture. In his introduction to *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987), Walter Benn Michaels states that his aim is to study how American writing is shaped by changes in economic production, distribution and consumption that occurred after the Civil War and his thesis is that the literary mode commonly called naturalism participates in and exemplifies a capitalist discursive system that is structured by a series of internal divisions. Each significant element of American economic practice—corporations, money, commodities and identities—is intrinsically differentiated from itself, and since writing too is a part of this massive political formation, it must also display the logic of contradiction that drives mercantile culture.

Perhaps the chapter that most clearly illustrates Michaels’s powers as a reader is the one from which he borrows his book’s title. There Michaels discusses the late nineteenth-century debates between the goldbugs and the advocates of paper currency, and he shows that the controversy between these groups stems from competing assumptions about the nature of money itself; while the defenders of precious metals sense that the value of gold resides in its innate beauty, their opponents think that gold is only desirable because it is a *representation* of money. Having delineated these opposing views, Michaels shows that both of these positions are illustrated in Frank Norris’s *Mc Teague*, for the narrative’s two misers are motivated by these contradictory models of wealth. Trina’s hoarding of gold enacts her society’s presumption that metal is the money itself, and her act encodes her culture’s fear that should precious metals stop circulating, civilization will be undone. Zerkow’s collecting of junk embodies his world’s recognition that if wealth is an effect of representation, then anything can be converted into money, and his behavior demonstrates that a discrepancy between material and value is the enabling condition of capital. Michaels’s point in producing this analysis is not that either of these

theories of wealth is truer than the other but that the tension between them is a constitutive element of the discourse of naturalism and that any literary text produced at this time will display both views toward money.

By demonstrating that the logic of naturalism informs both the gold-standard debate and Norris's text, Michaels performs the first task expected of the New Historicist, namely, explaining how writing is a part of the culture in which it was produced. In the same chapter, he turns to Norris's *Vandover and the Brute* to consider the ways that subjectivity is constructed. By means of an intricate reading operation, he shows that Vandover's consciousness is deeply divided, for while the character sometimes conceives of his self as an extension of his own animal being, at other times he discovers that his identity is a product of textual representation. But since this split neatly replicates the contradictions inherent in the nineteenth-century understanding of money, Michaels concludes that Vandover's subjectivity is fully inscribed in the discourse of naturalism. Michaels's understanding of selfhood shapes his response to the third question that Montrose claims New Historicists should address, for Michaels strongly insists that the socially constituted character of human identity prevents individuals from imagining progressive alternatives to the society in which they live. Indeed, in a particularly memorable passage, he dismisses utopian visions as fantasies of transcendence that have haunted cultural criticism from the time of Jeremiah. Finally, on the question of method, one must acknowledge that Michaels not only borrows from other scholars but actually offers insights that complicate existing theories. Although his use of Foucault's model of discourse is fairly predictable, his discussion of the ways capitalist practices conform to a structure of internal difference is innovative because, as Brook Thomas has noted, this idea indicates that the poststructuralist dismantling of the autonomous subject may be more complicit with mercantile economic systems than has often been recognized.

---

### 3.9 Charges against New Historicism :

---

In spite of gaining intellectual eminence, New Historicism has had to undergo severe criticisms. Firstly, it has been alleged that New Historicism tends to reduce literature to a footnote of history, and neglects the uniquely literary qualities of the work in question. Secondly, Frederick Jameson argues that much New Historicist criticism lacks a *theory* of history. That history, to paraphrase the bumper sticker, "just happens," without explaining why it happens in the way that it does and who is affected. The New Historicists were frequently denounced for not being intellectually coherent, for not having a proper method

at all. Rather, New Historicists were seen to be arch *briocoleurs*, making up their method as they went along, concocting a paradigm stew of anthropology, Marxism, history and psychology. And thirdly, though obsessed with the processes of power, New Historicism was also thought to be a political. Its readings, on the whole, suggested the monolithic and inventive nature of the state, capable of the subtlest forms of exclusion and suppression. New Historicists, moreover, had practiced their own forms of exclusion. Though they had tried to renovate the canon, they had largely focused on highly canonical figures. They were evangelists, in other words, for the much spurned 'dead white males, of the literary canon. They ignored writings by women and other minorities, preferring instead another reading of *King Lear*. For some critics, New Historicists were not nearly political enough.

---

### 3.10 Conclusion

---

None of the criticisms above is likely to dampen the enthusiasm within English departments for the New historical movement. What the New Historicism offers to students of literature is the the joy of new explanations, new paradigms. It does not designate an unexplored area of scholarly investigation. It does not raise new problems, new questions. If its attempts to "historicize" literary study were merely an inducement to look into new kinds of documents, to ask about the relation of literature to social history in a new way, the movement would perform a service for scholarship. But it does not. The New Historicism cannot be considered a new subspecialty within the discipline of English in the same sense as the older subspecialties of textual criticism or Renaissance studies. It is instead an academic specialty in the same sense that feminism is—a school of interpretation predisposed to find the same themes in every work it reads and to explain them always in the same terms.

New Historicists like to picture themselves as challenging 'the institution of criticism'—breaking loose from what Jane Tompkins describes as "the extremely narrow confines of literary study as it is now practiced within the academy."

The philosopher Michael Oakeshott has pointed out that a student of the past cannot learn the history of something without first discovering what kind of thing it is. In this respect, the New Historicism is not a genuine historical inquiry; it does not inquire into the true nature of literary works, because it is confident it already knows what they are. They are agents of ideology. Contrary to appearances, the movement is not an effort to discover what it means for a literary work to be historical; it is really little more than an attempt to get literary works to conform to a particular vision of history.

By the late 1990s, New Historicism continued to inspire productive and influential work. The flagship journal *Representations* continued to publish influential material from an eclectic range of disciplines ; and New Historicist studies continued to emerge.

---

### 3.11 Review questions

---

1. Describe the circumstances under which New Historicism arose?
2. What are the basic assumptions of New Historicism?
3. How is New Historicism related to the Marxist theory of literary criticism?
4. Who is responsible for introducing the term New Historicism? What is his contribution to the field of literary criticism?
5. Comment on Louis Montrose's remark: "New Historicism has a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history."
6. What are some of the allegations against New Historicism?
7. Write short notes on:
  - a) Michael Foucault.

---

### 3.12 Bibliography :

---

1. Abrams, M.H. 1988. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (5<sup>th</sup> edn.). London: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
2. Barrette, Michele. 1991. *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
3. Eagleton, Terry 1983. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford : Blackwell.
4. Foucault Michel 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Sheridan Smith, A.M. (trans.). London: Tavistock.
5. Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Sheridan, Alan (trans.) (first published in French, 1975). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
6. Foucault, Michel. 1980. What is an Author? (first published in English, 1977, in Bouchard, Donald F (ed), *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. New York: Cornell University Press). In Harari J.V.: 1980.
7. Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth 1989. *Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism*. In Veaser: 1989.

8. Goodman W.R. 2004. *Contemporary Literary Theory*. Delhi: Doaba House.
9. Greenblatt, Stephen J. 1980. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
10. Greenblatt, Stephen J. 1988. *Shakespearean Negotiations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
11. Greenblatt, Stephen J. 1990. *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*. London: Routledge.
12. Gugelberger, Georg M. 1994. Post cultural studies. In Grodon Michael and Kreiswirth, Martin (eds). *The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
13. Hawthorn, Jeremy. 1996. *Cunning Passages: New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Marxism in the Contemporary Literary Debate*. London: Arnold.
14. Higgins, John. 1999. *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism*. London: Routledge.
15. Makaryk, Irena R. (ed.). 1993. *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
16. Nostbakken, Faith. 1993. *Cultural Materialism*. In Makaryk: 1993.
17. Ryan, Kiernan (ed.). 1996. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader*. London: Arnold.
18. Selden, R. 1989. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: Haverter Wheatsheaf.
19. Supriya M. Ray & Ross Murfin. 1998. *The Bedford Glossary of Literary Terms*. Bedford Books.
20. Veenser, H. Aram (ed.). 1989. *The New Historicism*. New York and London: Routledge.

---

## Unit - 4 Cultural Materialism

---

### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Cultural Materialism : The beginning
- 4.2 The development of Cultural Materialist movement
- 4.3 Cultural Materialism : Basic Premises
- 4.4 How do the Cultural Materialists operate
- 4.5 Cultural Materialism Vs New Historicism
- 4.6 Cultural Materialism : Some Textual Readings
- 4.7 Conclusion
- 4.8 Review questions
- 4.9 Bibliography



---

### 4.0 Objective:

---

This unit introduces you to:

- the rise and growth of the Cultural Materialist movement
- the basic premises of cultural materialism
- the points of difference between Cultural Materialism and New Historicism
- few examples of cultural materialist studies

---

### 4.1 Cultural Materialism: The beginning

---

During the late 1970s the dominance of the ahistorical orthodoxies of New Criticism and Myth Criticism and Deconstruction, was challenged by a new theory and practice of literary history—New Historicism in America and its British counterpart Cultural Materialism. The term ‘cultural materialism’ was made current in 1985 when it was used by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield as the subtitle of their edited collection of essays *Political Shakespeare*. Raymond Williams, a British left-wing critic and his significant work *Culture and Society*

(1965), has been a guiding force in the Cultural Materialist movement. And both the movements have produced a substantial body of work on Renaissance literature and society, on Romanticism and aesthetics.

---

## 4.2 The development of the Cultural Materialist movement

---

Cultural Materialism, being a British counterpart of the American New Historical movement, developed under the leadership of those British critics who had wholly identified themselves with the movement such as Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, and have presented a more direct challenge to conventional criticism by advocating a much more openly political form of interpretation. Central to this is the attack on what they call 'essentialism'. The fullest account of this is to be found in Dollimore's reading of Renaissance drama in his book *Radical Tragedy*. Dollimore argues that conventional Christian and humanist readings of Renaissance drama posit an essentialist ideology by assuming that 'man' possesses an unalterable essence and thus transcends history and society. Dollimore advocates a "materialist' conception of the subject which sees it as the product of specific historical conditions and social relations. He argues that conventional criticism has projected essentialist ideas on to the interpretation of Renaissance drama and has ignored the degree to which anti-essentialist ideas can be found in some of the major writers and thinkers of the period, such as Montaigne, Machiavelli, Raleigh, Burton. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that Montaigne's view of 'custom' has much in common with Althusser's conception of ideology. In his interpretation of *King Lear*, for example, Dollimore rejects both Christian and humanist readings, which emphasise such ideas as pity and redemption, as based on mystification, and argues that the "play is fundamentally concerned with power and property. The influence of Raymond Williams is apparent in Dollimore's view that Edmund's scepticism represents the 'emergent' although his engagement in the struggle for power and property shows how 'a revolutionary (emergent) insight is folded back into a dominant ideology'. Dollimore concludes that the play 'offers ... a decentring of the tragic subject which in turn becomes the focus of a more general-exploration of human consciousness in relation to social being—one which discloses human values to be not antecedent to, but rather in formed by, material conditions.' Anti-essentialism has been associated with a variety of modern thinkers, such as Heidegger, Derrida, Thomas S. Kuhn, Richard Rorty and others. For example, Rorty writes of pragmatism and William James:

*My First characterisation of pragmatism is that it is simply anti-essentialism applied to nations like 'truth', 'Knowledge', 'language', 'morality', and similar object*



of philosophical theorizing... . Those who want truth to have an essence want want knowledge, or rationality, or inquiry or the relation between thought and its object, to have an essence. Further, they want to be able to use their knowledge of such essences to criticize views they take to be false, and to point the direction of progress towards the discovery of more truths.

Anti-essentialism is often associated with 'anti-foundationalism' and there is an important debate between the latter and 'foundationalism', the belief that one can or should try to base 'reason' or 'truth' on a firm foundation, a position whose most powerful defender is Jurgen Habermas.

Dollimore's anti-essentialism has little in common with that of Rorty or with anti-foundationalist thought generally and his use of the 'essentialism' to categorise what he wants to attack creates therefore a somewhat misleading picture of cultural materialism. The cultural materialist position seems much closer to that of Habermas and his view that, as Christopher Norris puts it, 'there must be certain positive norms—structures of rational understanding—which allow thought to criticize the current self-images of the age'. In the foreword to their book, *Political Shakespeare*, Dollimore and Sinfield write that cultural materialist criticism 'registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class', and their interpretations of texts are informed by this commitment. Rather than being anti-essentialist in a Derridean or Rortian sense, cultural materialism is better seen as opposing liberal-humanist essentialism with neo-Marxian alternative, which in Rorty's terms would be equally essentialist. Thus liberal-humanist interpretations of *King Lear* in terms of 'man' or 'nature' are rejected as false by Dollimore in favour of what he appears to regard as the 'true' reading, namely that it is 'above all, a play about power property and inheritance.'

By focusing on 'resistances' within the text which destabilise the prevailing ideology that the text would appear to support, cultural materialist critics use literary interpretation to promote social and political change. They adopt those concepts and ideas which are most useful from their point of view and discard the rest. Especially, Dollimore and Sinfield are much more direct and straightforward in their approach and have created an interpretative mode that has something of the force of a critic like Christopher Caudwell's reflective Marxist criticism but with a more sophisticated theoretical base.

---

### 4.3 Culture Materialism: Basic Premises

---

The British critic Graham Holderness describes cultural materialism as 'a politicised form of historiography'. This can be explained as meaning the study of historical material (which includes literary texts) within a politicised

framework. This framework includes the present which those literary texts have in some way helped to shape. Dollimore and Sinfield define the term in a foreword as designing a critical method which directs attention to four characteristics

1. historical context,
2. theoretical method,
3. political commitment and
4. textual analysis.

To comment briefly on each of these : firstly, the emphasis on *historical context* 'undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text'. Here the word 'transcendent' roughly means 'timeless'. The position taken, of course, needs to face the obvious objection that, if we are today still studying and reading Shakespeare then his plays have indeed proved themselves 'timeless' in the simple sense that they are clearly not limited by the historical circumstances in which they were produced. But this is a matter of degree. The aim of this aspect of cultural materialism is to allow the literary text to 'recover its histories', which previous kinds of study have often ignored. The kind of history recovered would involve relating the plays to such phenomenon as 'enclosures and the oppression of the rural poor, state power and resistance to it ...witchcraft, the challenge and containment of the carnivalesque' (Dollimore and Sinfield). Secondly, the emphasis on *theoretical method* signifies the break with liberal humanism and the absorbing of the lessons of structuralism, post-structuralism, and other approaches which have become prominent since the 1970s. Thirdly, the emphasis on *political commitment* signifies the influence of Marxist and feminist perspectives and the break from the conservative-Christian framework which hitherto dominated Shakespeare criticism. Finally, the stress on *textual analysis* 'locates the critique of traditional approaches where it can be ignored'. In other words, there is a commitment not just to making theory of an abstract kind, but to practising it on canonical texts which continue to be the focus of massive amount academic and professional attention, and which are prominent national and cultural icons.

The two words in the term 'cultural materialism' are further defined. 'Culture' will include *all* forms of culture ('forms like television and popular music and fiction'). That is, this approach does not limit itself to 'high' cultural forms like the Shakespeare play. 'Materialism' signifies the opposite of 'idealism' : an 'idealist' belief would be that high culture represents the free and independent play of the talented individual mind ; the contrary 'materialist' belief is that culture cannot 'transcend the material forces and relations of production. Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, not can it be independent of it'. These comments on materialism

represent the standard beliefs of Marxist criticism, and they do perhaps point to the difficulty of making a useful distinction between a 'straight' Marxist criticism and cultural materialism. However, it may be added that the relevant history is not just that of four hundred years ago, but that of the times (including the present) in which Shakespeare is produced and reproduced. Thus, in cultural materialism there is an emphasis on the functioning of the institutions through which Shakespeare is now brought to us—the Royal Shakespeare Company, the film industry, the publishers who produce textbooks for school and college, and the National Curriculum, which lays down the requirement that specific Shakespeare plays be studied by all school pupils.

Cultural materialism takes a good deal of its outlook (including its name) from the British left-wing critic Raymond Williams. Instead of Foucault's notion of 'discourse' Williams invented the term 'structures of feeling'. These are concerned with meanings and values as they are lived and felt'. Structures of feeling are often antagonistic both to explicit systems of values and beliefs, and to the dominant ideologies within a society. They are characteristically found in literature, and they *oppose* the status quo (as the values in Dickens, the Brontes, etc., represent human structures of feeling which are at variance with Victorian commercial and materialist values). The result is that cultural materialism is much more optimistic about the possibility of change and is willing at times to see literature as a source of oppositional values. Cultural materialism particularly involves using the past to 'read' the present, revealing the politics of our own society by what we choose to emphasise or suppress of the past. A great deal of the British work has been about undermining what it sees as the fetishistic role of Shakespeare as a conservative icon within British culture. This form of cultural materialism can be conveniently sampled in three 'New Accents' books: *The Shakespeare Myth* by Graham Holderness, *Alternative Shakespeares* ed. by John Drakakis and *That Shakespearean Rag* by Terence Hawkins.

---

#### 4.4 How do the Cultural Materialists operate

---

The Cultural materialist critics adopt the following strategies :

They read the literary texts (very often a Renaissance play) in such a way as to enable us to 'recover its histories', that is, the context of exploitation from which it emerged.

At the same time, they foreground those elements in the work's present transmission and contextualising which caused those histories to be lost in the first place, (for example, the "heritage" industry's packaging of Shakespeare in terms of history-as-pageant, as national bard, as cultural icon, and so on.

They use a combination of Marxist and feminist approaches to the text, especially in order to recover the histories and specifically in order to fracture the previous dominance of conservative social, political and religious assumptions in Shakespeare criticism.

They use the technique of close textual analysis, but often employ structuralist and post-structuralist techniques, especially to mark a break with the inherited tradition of close textual analysis within the framework of conservative cultural and social assumptions.

At the same time, they work mainly within traditional notions of the canon, on the grounds that writing about more obscure texts hardly ever constitutes an effective political intervention (for instance, in debates about the school curriculum or national identity).

---

#### 4.5 Cultural Materialism Vs New Historicism

---

Though cultural materialism is often linked in discussion with new historicism, its American counterpart, the cultural materialists have developed a more politically radical type of historicism, and have challenged the 'functionalism' of Greenblatt. They see Foucault as implying a more precarious and unstable structure of power, and they often aim to derive from his work a history of 'resistances' to dominant ideologies. Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, Catherine Belsey, Francis Barker and others have adopted some of the theoretical refinements to be found in Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature*, especially his distinction between 'residual', 'dominant' and 'emergent' aspects of culture. By replacing the Tillyardian concept of a single spirit of the age with Williams's more dynamic model of culture, they have freed a space for the exploration of the complex totality of Renaissance society including its subversive and marginalised elements. They assert that every history of subjection also contains a history of resistance, and that resistance is not just a symptom of and justification for subjection but is the true mark of an ineradicable 'difference' which always prevents power from closing the door on change. A further important concern of Dollimore and others is with the 'appropriations' of Renaissance cultural representations which occurred at the time and subsequently. The meanings of literary texts are never entirely fixed by some universal criterion, but are always in play, and subject to specific (often politically radical) appropriations, including those of the cultural materialists themselves', Catherine Belsey has used the more neutral term 'cultural history' to describe her lively and political view of the task ahead. She urges the new history to adopt the perspective of 'change', cultural difference and the relativity of 'truth', and to give priority to the 'production' of alternative knowledges'

and 'alternative subject positions', something she seeks to do in more recent works, including *The Subject of Tragedy* (1985) and *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (1994).

Dollimore's *Political Shakespeare* includes new historicist essays, and the introduction explains some of the differences between the two movements. Firstly, in a neat distinction Dollimore and Sinfield quote Marx to the effect that 'men and women make their own history but not in conditions of their own choosing': cultural materialists, they say, tend to concentrate on the interventions whereby men and women make their own history, whereas new historicists tend to focus on the less than ideal circumstances in which they do so, that is, on the 'power of social and ideological structures' which restrain them. The result is a contrast between political optimism and political pessimism. Secondly, cultural materialists see new historicists as cutting themselves off from effective political positions by their acceptance of a particular version of post-structuralism, with its radical scepticism about the possibility of attaining secure knowledge. The rise of post-structuralism, problematises knowledge, language, truth, etc., and this perspective is absorbed into new historicism and becomes an important part of it. The new historicist defence against this charge would be that being aware of the inbuilt uncertainty of all knowledge doesn't mean that we give up trying to establish truths, it simply means that we do so conscious of the dangers and limitations involved, thus giving their own intellectual enquiries a special authority. This is rather like sailing into dangerous waters knowingly, with all sensible precautions taken, rather than being blithely unaware of the dangers. Thus, when new historicists claim that Foucault gives them entry into 'a nontruth-oriented form of historicist study of texts', this doesn't mean that they do not believe that what they say is true, but rather that they know the risks and dangers involved in claiming to establish truths. A third important difference between new historicism and cultural materialism is that where the former's co-texts are documents contemporary with Shakespeare, the latter's may be programme notes for a current Royal Shakespeare Company production, quotations of Shakespeare by a Gulf War pilot, or pronouncements on education by a government minister. To put this in another way: the new historicist situates the literary text in the political situation of its own day, while the cultural materialist situates it within that of ours. This is really to restate the difference in political emphasis between the two approaches. Indeed, it could be said that all three of the differences between new historicism and cultural materialism are located in this time-based difference of political emphasis.

In spite of the above differences the new historical and cultural materialist movement share the following characteristics:

Both are anti-establishment and accept freedom and celebrate difference and deviance.

Both emphasise the role of history and post-structuralism in different ways.

Both are interested in defamiliarising canonical texts.

Both of them absorb ideas from structural as well as post-structural approaches.

Close reading of texts is a shared feature.

Both encourage creative interpretation.

---

#### 4.6 Cultural Materialism: Some Textual Readings

---

An example of an informal variant of this approach is Terence Hawke's essay 'Telmah' (in his book *The Shakespearean Rag*). This is the fourth piece in the book, each one being centred on the work of one of the major Shakespearean critics of the early part of the century, within an overall strategy of looking at how Shakespeare is mediated and processed to us. In this chapter the critic is John Dover Wilson, best known for his 1930s book *What Happens in Hamlet?* The opening section considers aspects of *Hamlet*, emphasising cyclic and symmetrical elements of the play, such as how the beginning echoes the end, how the same situation occurs several times in it and considering how indefinite the beginning and end of any performance are, since the play is already culturally situated in some way in people's minds before they see it. A repeated motif of looking backwards in the play (to a past which was better than the present) leads Hawke to imagine a 'reversed' *Hamlet* which shadows the actual play, the 'Telmah' of his title. The second section is entitled 'To the Sunderland Station' alluding to the title of a well-known history of the Russian Revolution called *To the Finland Station*. An account is given of John Dover Wilson on the train to Sunderland in 1917, sent by the government to sort out labour problems in a munitions factory, and reading W. W. Greg's article on *Hamlet* which argues that the king's failure to react openly to the dumb show indicates that he is a figure of some complexity, not just a story-book villain. If he is this then he begins to claim some of our attention, and distracts us from the exclusive focus on Hamlet himself which had been the traditional way of responding to the play, at least from the time of the Romantics. Wilson's excited outrage at this notion is related to financial desire for order manifested in his published writings about Russia which see it as a picturesque 'organic' feudal state, which, in turn, looks like a version of the England which his social class regards with nostalgia and fears might be lost. Dover Wilson's rushing to the defence of Hamlet, threatened cultural icon, in his reply to Greg, and later in his *Hamlet* book, are

seen as symptomatic of this too. Shortly after the First World War Wilson was a member of the Newbolt Committee which reported on the teaching of English, and saw it as providing a form of social cohesion which might save the country from the fate which overtook Russia. Hawkes also quotes a letter from Neville Chamberlain praising *What Happens in Hamlet?*, and thus creates a pattern of appeasing and containing difference. Hence, a way of interpreting the play is placed among several co-texts from twentieth-century life, and thus the play itself is culturally transformed. Hawkes's final reading of the end of the play involves inserting an extra stage direction, and his model for a criticism of this kind is that of the jazz musician who doesn't transmit a received text, but *transforms* what he *performs*. That might be taken as the characteristic of this variant of cultural materialist criticism.

Another study of Cultural Materialism can be had in the analysis of another political play *Henry V*; specifically, the difficult relationship between visions of the future and the known history presented in the play. Three particular moments of historical/cultural schism may be analyzed: between the play and the history it represents, when the final Chorus steps forward and tells us that everything Henry has won will shortly be lost; between the play and its originary moment, where a hopeful vision of the Earl of Essex returning victorious to London from Ireland is dashed only months after the play premiered; and between a modern victor in a modern battle, in a series of articles in *Forbes* magazine using Shakespeare's play to "understand" the Gulf War.

*Henry V* ends with Henry's total victory crowned with a number of visions of future peace and prosperity. Then the final Chorus steps forward and tells us what history—and the Elizabethan stage—already knows: that everything this theatrically resurrected but historically contingent Henry has won will shortly be lost. But there is another schism between visions and history in the play. The Chorus at the beginning of the last act contains a vision of the Earl of Essex, "the general of our gracious empress", returning victorious to London from Ireland; for Shakespeare's audience, this vision was soon to suffer the same fate as the famous victories of Henry V, where high expectations end in ignominy and civil unrest. A third vision of victory that came into conflict with a historical outcome when *Forbes* magazine published an article just after the Gulf War comparing George Bush's extraordinary military triumph to Shakespeare's dramatization of Henry's victory at Agincourt, complete with visions of a nation united under a strong and wise and successful leader. A year later, *Forbes* published another article that effectively served as the final Chorus in *Henry V*, recognizing that Bush lost the election just as the English eventually lost what they had gained in France. These three visions may be linked in order to offer a template for using the relationships of texts to historical

moments for a better understanding of the cultural materialist approach.

In Terence Hawkes' cultural materialist dictum, "we mean by Shakespeare" (3) — a Shakespeare play doesn't have one singular inherent true meaning, but rather picks up meanings and often is made to mean particular things at particular historical and cultural moments. Similarly, current Performance Studies practitioners point out that theatre always has "excessive contextuality" (Shannon Jackson: "Professing Performance"). The theatre event is not a hermetically sealed, aesthetically stable and controlled artifact but rather is implicated within, even bursting with its own cultural, historical, social and political contexts, those "constellations of elements that comprise its habitus and its field" (David Savran: "Choices Made and Unmade"). Perhaps not surprisingly, in anticipation of both of the points above, Ralph Berry concludes his 1981 production history of *Henry V* by stating "What happens to [*Henry V*] in the future will no doubt be determined less by directors than by history" (81).

It is seen within the play itself that theatre and history have an uneasy relationship. Theatre can raise the dead, although the Chorus, ever modest, says they are only "flat, unraised spirits" on this "unworthy scaffold" and that it is the audience who must do much of the work to "piece out our imperfections with your thoughts" (Prologue 9, 10, 23). Perhaps this is slightly disingenuous. The end of the play proper is filled with visions for a glorious future; the French King starts the vision as he gives away his daughter:

King Charles            Take her, fair son, and from her blood raise up  
Issue to me, that the contending kingdoms  
Of France and England, whose very shores look pale  
With envy of each other's happiness,  
May cease their hatred, and this dear conjunction  
Plant neighbourhood and Christian-like accord  
In their sweet bosoms, that never war advance  
His bleeding sword 'twixt England and fair France.  
(5.2.332-40)

The French Queen concurs, and develops the vision further:

Queen Isabel            God, the best maker of all Marriages,  
Combine your hearts in one, your realms in one!  
As man and wife, being two, are one in love,  
So be there' twixt your kingdoms such a spousal,  
That never may ill office, or fell jealousy,  
Which troubles oft the bed of blessed marriage,



Thrust in between in paction of these kingdoms,  
To make divorce of their incorporate league;  
That English may as French, French Englishmen,  
Receive each other, God speak this "Amen"! (344-53)

And, fittingly enough, Henry himself has the final word to cap this vision for the future:

King Henry    Prepare we for our marriage—on which day.  
                  My Lord of Burgundy, we'll take your oath,  
                  And all the peers', for surety of our leagues.  
                  Then shall I swear to Kate, and you to me;  
                  And may our oaths well kept and prosperous be! (355-9)

But the Characters' future vision is a theatrical soft ball lobbed towards the final Chorus, who knocks it out of the wooden O into the historical future already past and the theatrical sequel already played:

Chorus                    Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned King  
                              Of France and England, did this king succeed;  
                              Whose state so many had the managing,  
                              That they lost France and made his England bleed,  
                              Which oftour stage hath shown...(Epilogue 9-13)

That final Chorus might be seen as reluctant, ironic, sobering, or as a bit of a sucker punch, but the final result is the same: the vision of a glorious future espoused within the fiction is met and deflated by more history and another play. The relationship between theatre and history remains, if now for a different reason from that suggested in the opening Chorus, an uneasy one.

Between the play and its originary historical moment, there is another uneasy relationship. The Act 5 Chorus contains "the only explicit, extradramatic, incontestable reference to a contemporary event anywhere in the [Shakespearean] canon" (Taylor 7):

Chorus                    Were now the general of our gracious empress,  
                              As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,  
                              Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,  
                              How many would the peaceful city quit,  
                              To welcome him! Much more, and much more cause,  
                              Did they this Harry.(5.0.30-5)

In order better to make the point about the historical Henry's post-Agincourt reception in London to the contemporary London audience members he is addressing at the play's historical moment, the Chorus talks about our gracious empress, Elizabeth, and the General now in Ireland, who is the Earl of Essex, and suggests an equivalence in terms of high expectations, victory, glory,

honour, and a grateful and celebrating nation. This reference rather precisely dates the writing of the play at early 1599. Essex left for Ireland on March 27, 1599, by midsummer the success of the expedition was in doubt, and on September 28, 1599. Essex returned to London in shame, defeated (Taylor 5). Less than two years later in February 1601, after a failed rebellion that most pointedly did not stir the London crowds, the former general was executed by his no longer gracious or grateful empress. The topical reference and hopeful vision from the moment the play was written tells a very different story shortly thereafter; perhaps not so strangely, it is a change in story very similar to that attested by the final Chorus on the historical Henry. Like the golden boy Henry and all his achievements, Essex too is sucker-punched by history, this time from an epilogue outside the bounds of the play. The contemporary equivalence itself becomes historically contingent.

Between the play and its life in the early 1990s, there may be seen yet another uneasy relationship. Under the leadership of George Bush, US forces fought the Gulf War in February/March 1991. Shortly after that stunning victory, an article appeared in *Forbes* Magazine, using Shakespeare's historical play to better understand the current events. "Miracle in the desert: to grasp the full miraculous measure of the US victory in the Gulf", the article tells us, "you have to go back and read Shakespeare's *Henry V*" (Novak 62). The article makes a number of detailed comparisons between the Gulf War Shakespeare's play, and points up some startling equivalencies, starting with the same number of casualties on the winning side. Henry reads the lists after the battle and finds four "of name" and "of all other men but five and twenty" (4.8.103-4); *Forbes* points out that "US forces leading the Great Coalition threw half a million soldiers against deeply entrenched Iraqis, and in four days emerged triumphant at the cost of our 29 Americans Killed in the assault" (Novak 62). The article ends with the recognition that in both cases providence must have been on the side of the victors: "O God thy arm was here ... and be it death proclaimed throughout our host to boast of this, or take that praise from God which is his only ... God fought for us" says Henry (4.8.104, 112-14, 118); *Forbes* concurs with "above all, though this nation owes thanks to God...God gave us our 'Saint Crispin's Day' and we should thank Him for it" (Novak 63). A number of further equivalencies are drawn:

Like Bush Henry V was mocked by his foes as too weak and soft to fight  
Like Bush, Henry V grew in purpose and in stature from the first moments of his expedition until its bloody climax. Like Bush, Henry V was fond of terms like "kind" and "gentle," but fiercely resolute for vindication of the right. Like Bush, before the battle Henry V prayed mightily—knowing well the probability of slaughter, massacre and abject failure (Novak 63)

The article also points to an equivalence in the ability to rise above domestic problems: “Moiling, muddling and malaise on domestic policy have not been unknown to this Administration. But not in this case, not during these seven months” (Novak 63). A further equivalence might be seen in the two leaders’ powers of persuasion: “George Bush sized up Saddam Hussein almost instantly. Then slowly, ever so slowly he persuaded the rest of the world to see reality as he did” (Novak 63). One of the most interesting equivalencies comes in a verbal echo of the “band oi brothers” speech : a vision of the future, where Henry tells his men that

Then shall our names  
Familiar in [the] mouth as household words—  
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,  
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester--  
Be in their cups freshly remembered. (4.3.51-5)

becomes in the *Forbes* article an equally exuberant list of future heroes : after the President’s “inspired leadership” we have “the reassuring figure of Dick Cheney at Defense; the strategic sense of General Colin Powell; ‘Stormin’ Norman Schwarzkopf, who executed the final ‘Hail Mary’ offensive thrust, and ... Iowa’s General ‘Chuck’ Horner, who masterminded a brilliant air campaign” (Novak 63). The comparisons between the Gulf War and *Henry V* all make the case that this is a high point for a grateful nation.

For a two-page magazine article, this is a fairly thorough reading of the play; it is, of course, not exactly complete. Like the triumphant Henry in the play, and like Essex in Ireland in the reference, Bush-as-Henry/Gulf-as-Agincourt comes to be rewritten, as we shift the cultural and historical context forward once more.

What does this article leave out? More history in the future that it doesn’t yet know, and that final Chorus in Shakespeare’s play. The workings of American politics supplies another equivalency between Bush and Henry, and less than two years later, *Forbes* magazine supplies the missing Shakespearean Chorus. Just as Henry’s glory and achievements lasted but a “small time” (Epilogue 5), so to with George Bush. Less than two years later, Bush is out of office, and after the great victory comes a sobering letdown. “Small time, but in that small most greatly lived/ This star of England” says the final Chorus of its historically contingent hero; “despite his reelection defeat”, *Forbes* assures us, “former president George Bush has won a special place in history for what he did to prepare for and prosecute the Gulf War” (Forbes Jr.). Bush lost the reelection and, in 1993, *Forbes* can recognize the constants of Shakespeare’s final Chorus : “of course, the 15th-century French eventually routed the English” (Forbes Jr.). Should one wish to compound the irony — or at least explore the possibilities for yet another historically contingent equivalence at the moment

I'm writing this paper — ten years later the great leader's son is contemplating a move against the same, apparently rejuvenated enemy. We can but hope we don't find ourselves in a further series of equivalencies with Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays.

Cultural materialism encourages us to look carefully for the places — the fault lines, to use Alan Sinfield's term—where the aims of an ideology or a power structure may reveal themselves to be incomplete. In the first *Forbes* article, the ringing endorsement of the power status quo leaves room to be undone, even in its own chosen literary template. The text of *Henry V* remains uncontained by a single or singular reading; the ideology of Bush-and-America triumphant, like the ideology of Henry-and-England or Essex-and-England triumphant, is revealed as susceptible to historical contingencies and alternative readings.

From a cultural materialist perspective, a play by Shakespeare is both implicated and embroiled in often complex ways in its own historical and cultural moment, and can also generate more meanings, can be made to mean more things, as it is reproduced at other historical and cultural moments. The question of how a play means often opens up into a wider question, of how a culture means — how a society may rehearse its ideologies, anxieties and desires through performances, critical readings, or even what passes for a general understanding of Shakespeare's plays at particular historical junctures. The fictional world of a Shakespeare play, once locally embodied on the stage or in a popular magazine, provides opportunities for examining and/or shaping the actual conditions of the audience's world. In the case of *Henry V*, the play acts as a magnet, picking up what is in the air — although, of course, the winds always shift and that air keeps changing.

---

## 4.7 Conclusion

---

It is quite evident from the study that the terms 'New Historicism' and 'Cultural Materialism' cover a wide range of approaches to the study of literature and history. As might be expected these new approaches have questioned the received canon of literary works in orthodox literary histories, often in conjunction with feminist, postcolonialist and lesbian criticism. In discussing the canon of nineteenth-century American literature, New Historicists such as Jane Tompkins and Cathy Davidson have drawn attention to popular and genre fiction. The sentimental novel, for example, says Tompkins, 'offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville'. At the same time, however, it has been argued that in much New Historicist criticism, challenges to the canon

have involved, 'less the detection of its 'others' ... than a repeated challenging of the familiar privileged texts which, while throwing them into a new perspective, leaves the canon itself pretty much intact'. Once more, British Cultural Materialism is thought, to present a more decisive challenge, opening up post-war British popular culture and society to a politicised analysis in areas where New Historicist techniques are enlisted by Cultural Studies. The British tradition has tried to differentiate itself from what it sees as a limited American reading of Foucault. However, there is a rich fusion of radical currents of historicist thought which suggests the possibility of converging Anglo-American streams.

Structuralist critics set out to master the text and to open its secrets. Poststructuralists believe that this desire is vain because there are unconscious, or linguistic, or historical forces which cannot be mastered. The signifier floats away from the signified, *jouissance* dissolves meaning, the semiotic disrupts the symbolic, *differance* insets a gap between signifier and signified, and power disorganises established knowledge. Poststructuralists ask questions rather than give answers; they seize upon the differences between what the text says and what it thinks it says. They set the text to work against itself, and refuse to force it to mean one thing only. They deny the separateness of 'literature', and deconstruct non-literary discourses by reading them as themselves rhetorical texts. Nevertheless, Foucault and the New Historicists initiate a new kind of inter-textual historical theory which is inevitably an interventionist one since it assists in remaking the past. In Cultural Materialism a commitment to transgressive and oppositional voices becomes more explicit. As such, while it draws upon poststructuralism it questions the claims of some versions of it to liberate an innocent free play of meanings.

---

#### 4.8 Review questions:

---

1. Give an account of the rise and growth of the Cultural Materialist movement.
2. What are the basic assumptions of the Cultural Materialist approach to literary criticism? How do the cultural materialists operate?
3. Name two exponents of Cultural Materialist criticism. Write about their contribution.
4. How does Cultural Materialism differ from New Historicism as a critical approach to literary texts?
5. Attempt a Cultural Materialist study of Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

---

## 4.9 Bibliography :

---

1. Abrams, M.H. 1988. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (5<sup>th</sup> edn.). London : Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
2. Sinfield, Alan. 1992. *Faultlines : Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*. Berkeley : University of California Press.
3. Barry, Peter. 1995. *Beginning Theory : An introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester University Press.
4. Berry, Ralph. 1981. *Changing Styles in Shakespeare*. London : George Allen and Unwin.
5. Dollimore, Jonathan & Sinfield, Alan (eds.). 1994. *Political Shakespeare : New Essays in Cultural Materialism*. Manchester University Press.
6. Eagleton, Terry. 1983. *Literary Theory : An Introduction*. Oxford : Blackwell.
7. Forbes Jr., Malcolm S. *Forbes* 1 Feb. 1993: "They Can't Take This Away From Bush."
8. Fowler, Roger. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*. London : Routledge.
9. Goodman. W.R. 2004. *Contemporary Literary Theory*. Delhi : Doaba House.
10. Gugelberger, Georg M. 1994. Post cultural studies. In Groden. Michael and Kreiswirth, Martin (eds). *The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
11. Harris, V. Wendell. *Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism*, Greenwood Press.
12. Hawkes, Terence 1992. *Meaning By Shakespeare*. London : Routledge.
13. Hawthorn, Jeremy. 1996. *Cunning passages : New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Marxism in the Contemporary Literary Debate*. London : Arnold.
14. Higgins, John. 1999. *Raymond Williams : Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism*. London : Routledge.
15. Jefferson, Ann & Robey, David (eds.). 1986. *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*. B.T.Batsford.
16. Krishnaswamy. Varghese John & Mishra, Sunita. 2001. *Contemporary Literary Theory*. Macmillan.
17. Lodge, David. 1989. *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*. Longman.
18. Lodge, David. 1988. *Modern Criticism & Theory : A Reader*. Longman.

19. Makaryk, Irena R : (ed). 1993. *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*. Toronto : University of Toronto Press.
20. Novak, Michael. *Forbes* 1 April 1991: 62-3. "Miracle in the Desert."
21. Newton. K.M, 1990. *Interpreting the Text : A Critical Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Literary Interpretation*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
22. Ramaswami. S & Seturaman, V. S. 1978. *The English Critical Tradition : An Anthology of English Literary Criticism (Vols. I & 11)*. Macmillan.
23. Ryan, Kierman (ed.). 1996. *New Historicism. and Cultural Materialism : A Reader*. Arnold.
24. Shakespeare, William. *Henry V*. Ed. Gray Taylor. Oxford : Oxford University Press 1982.
25. Selden, R. 1989. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. London : Harvester Wheatsheaf.
26. Seturaman, V. S. 1989. *Contemporary Criticism : An Anthology*. Macmillan.
27. White Hayden. 1978. *Topics of Discourse : Essays in Cultural Criticism*. John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore.
28. Williams, Raymond. 1958. *Culture and Society 1780-1950*. London : Chatto & US.
29. Willams, Raymond. 1980. *Problems in Materialism and Culture : Selected Essays*. London : Verso.

---

## Unit - 5 Marxist Criticism

---

### Structure

- 5.1. Basis and Superstructure : Engels
  - 5.2. Basis and Superstructure : Marx
  - 5.3. Practitioners of Marxist criticism
    - 5.3.1. Christopher Caudwell
    - 5.3.2. Walter Benjamin
    - 5.3.3. George Lukacs
    - 5.3.4. Louis Althusser
    - 5.3.5. Pierre Macherey
    - 5.3.6. Antonio Gramsci
    - 5.3.7. Raymond Williams
    - 5.3.8. Terry Eagleton
    - 5.3.9. Fredric Jameson
  - 5.4. Marxism and other theories
    - 5.4.1. Marxism and Russian Formalism
    - 5.4.2. Marxism and Feminism
  - 5.5. Conclusion
- Review questions

---

## 5 Marxist Criticism

---

The theory and practice of socialism and communism as embodied in the writings of Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich (or Frederick) Engels (1821-1895) are known as Marxism. Marx and Engels, therefore, were principally dealing with human societies, their history and development as related to class struggles and revolutions. They were not, primarily, literary critics. Their concern was socio-economic change. The primary concerns were the nature of a capitalist society and how class struggles within a capitalist society could lead to a better society. Of course, a social change includes changes in literature and other forms of culture. Marx and Engels knew this and did make many comments on writings of contemporary authors and on time-honoured classics. But we cannot follow them mechanically, that is, without relating them with the principal concerns mentioned above.



---

## 5.1 Basis and Superstructure : Engels's letter to Joseph Bloch, September 21,1890

---

Any society, Marxism shows, rests on material wealth produced by labour. That section of society which possesses this wealth and the means of its production constitutes the ruling class. Marxism regards the economic situation as the material basis of society. On this basis rests the superstructure which includes the whole world of ideas (e.g. philosophy, religion, culture, education, law, political institutions etc).

What is the relation between the basis and the superstructure? It is not a simple one : it will not do if we say that when the basis changes, the superstructure changes with it; nor if we say that no change in the superstructure is possible until the basis of society changes. A well-known statement on this matter of basis-superstructure relations in Marxism is contained in a letter written by Engels to Bloch in 1890. Part of it is quoted below :

... According to the materialistic conception of history, the *ultimately* determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure — political forms of the class struggle and its results, such as constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and especially the reflections of all these real struggles in the brains of the participants, political, legal, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas — also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their *form* in particular. ... We make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite antecedents and conditions. Among these the economic ones are ultimately decisive. But the political ones, etc., and indeed even the traditions which haunt human minds also play a part, although not the decisive one.

What do we learn from Engels's comment?

- (a) The economic situation is the ultimately decisive factor in social change, but not the only determining factor.
- (b) Various elements of the superstructure also influence the course of history, especially the particular forms of historical struggles. These elements also influence each other.

- (c) Real struggles cast their reflections on the brains of the participants. What happens in the brain (*i.e.* ideas) in turn influences struggles. Therefore, it is a two-way traffic : basis and superstructure influence each other.
- (d) These arguments imply that literature is not simply the effect of some cause provided by the economic situation, social changes, real struggles. This point will be supplemented by the next paragraph.

---

## 5.2 Basis and Superstructure : Marx's Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy

---

Engels's remarks in the above letter follow from the theoretical formulations made by Marx in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859 ) and further developed in *Capital*. In the *Critique*, Marx shows that on the "real Foundation" of society all material production is made possible; but there is an "unequal development of material production and, *e.g.*, that of art". He goes on to say :

As regards art it is well known that some of its peaks by no means correspond to the general development of society; nor do they therefore to the material substructure, the skeleton as it were of its organisation. For example the Greeks compared with the modern [nations], or else Shakespeare. It is even acknowledged that certain branches of art, *e.g.*, the epos, can no longer be produced in their epoch-making classic form after artistic production as such has begun; in other words that certain important creations within the compass of art are only possible at an early stage in the development of art. If this is the case with the different branches of art within the sphere of art itself, it is not so remarkable that this should also be the case with regard to the entire sphere of art and its relation to the general development of society. The difficulty lies only in the general formulation of these contradictions. As soon as they are reduced to specific questions they are already explained.

Marx goes on to explain this difference between spiritual production and material production. It is not enough to say that economic facts are the ultimate (though not the sole) foundation of literature, art etc. The fruitfulness of this assertion lies in a specific analysis, not in its universality. Material production has to be grasped in its specific historical form. Otherwise what is specific in its spiritual production cannot be grasped.

Moreover, Marx also shows that while material production has moved from one epoch to another (say, from medieval to modern) spiritual production may not have so developed. This uneven development has to be noticed in a specific analysis. Also, imagination has its own attraction. Long after society

has ceased to believe in gods and ghosts, we continue to enjoy Greek epics and Shakespeare's apparitions. "The charm their art has for us does not conflict with the immature stage of the society in which it originated. On the contrary its charm is a consequence of this and is inseparably linked with the fact that the immature social conditions which gave rise, and which alone could give rise, to this art cannot recur."

---

### 5.3. Practitioners of Marxist criticism

---

**5.3.1 Christopher Caudwell :** A notable practitioner of this belief was the British Marxist Christopher Caudwell (1907-1937) who died in Spain fighting in the International Brigade. Caudwell's best-known work in his *Illusion and Reality : A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (1937) Here, Caudwell offers a Marxist analysis of the development of English poetry, somewhat crudely correlating the stages of this development with economic phases such as primitive accumulation, the Industrial Revolution, and the decline of capitalism. In the wide-ranging book, Caudwell addressed the origins of poetry, the connection of poetry to mythology and the unconscious, as well as the future role of poetry in the struggle for Socialism. Again, in a discussion of nineteenth-century English poets entitled, 'English Poets : The Decline of Capitalism', he writes that "Arnold, Swinburne, Tennyson and Browning, each in his own way, illustrate the movement of the bourgeois illusion in this 'tragic' stage of history." He goes on to say of Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam* : "Like Darwin, and even more Darwin's followers, he projects the conditions of capitalist production into Nature (individual struggle for existence) and then reflects this struggle, intensified by its instinctive and therefore unalterable blindness, back into society, so that God—symbol of the internal forces of society—seems captive to Nature—symbol of the external environment of society." Caudwell's subsequent writings included *Studies in a Dying Culture* (1938), *Further Studies in a Dying Culture* (1949), and *Romance and Realism* (1970), All his works were published posthumously.

**5.3.2 Walter Benjamin:** Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), a German Marxist critic, was sympathetic to modernism, and in one of his most influential essays, *The Artist as Producer*, he argues that the most revolutionary art cannot merely replicate traditional forms if it is going to further social change. This will merely lead to art being consumed by a bourgeois audience, even if such art is apparently committed to Marxist ideas. Benjamin was a major advocate of the work of the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, a committed Marxist, but one who rejected the dominant Marxist aesthetic of socialist realism, an

approach to art that required it to conform to Marxist doctrine and promote socialist aims. Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1955) contains important observations on Bandelaire, Proust and Kafka.

**5.3.3 George Lukacs :** George Lukacs (1885-1971) an Hungarian Marxist critic in the Hegelian tradition, writes in his early essay *The Evolution of Modern Drama* (1909) that 'the truly social element in literature is the form'. This view undergoes a change in his later writings which move away from the Hegelian to the Marxist tradition. *The Historical Novel* (1936-37) and *The Meaning of contemporary Realism* (1957) are classics of Marxist criticism.

**5.3.4 Louis Althusser :** Marxist criticism in the later half of the twentieth century saw a shift away from the reflective model. The major intellectual influence on this change was that of the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990) in works such as *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971), which tended to concentrate on Marx's earlier writings. Althusser also drew on structuralist ideas and this alignment between Marxism and structuralism made Marxist criticism more appealing to critics who were not committed Marxists but were in broad sympathy with it or who accepted its analysis in part. Two aspects of Althusser's revision of Marxism were especially influential because they allowed Marxist criticism to break away from the reflective model—the first was the concept of social formation, the second that of ideological state apparatuses. Each particular state apparatus creates its own form of ideological discourse and, through a process which Althusser defines as 'interpellation', calls upon individuals to take up a 'subject position', one which serves the interests of the dominant class.

**5.3.5 Pierre Macherey :** Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production*, first published in French in 1966 and in English in 1978, is the first major literary study in which Marxism and structuralist thinking were aligned. For Macherey the ideology governing a work cannot be separated from the question of form since the literary text is "rooted in historical reality" not in a direct way "but only through a complex series of mediations". Thus history is not directly accessible in literature and so can be apprehended only indirectly. Macherey argues that literary representation is under the control of ideology and the role of criticism is to reveal history not as a presence in the text but as an 'absence' that which ideology excludes but which can be discerned in the fissures or gaps in the text which expose the incoherence of its ideology.

**5.3.6 Antonio Gramsci** : The Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) with his concept of 'hegemony', allows for a flexible reading of the base and superstructure model. He used the term 'hegemony' to denote the predominance of one social class over others (e.g. bourgeois hegemony). This represents not only political and economic control, but also the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as 'common sense' and 'natural'. He believes that ideology alone cannot explain the extent to which people are willing to accept dominant values. He also realizes, along with many other Marxist critics (see 4.5.1) that the base/superstructure model is much too rigid to account for cultural productions which do not simply reinforce those dominant values. In away, Gramsci's notion of hegemony is a continuation of the concepts behind ideology. Hegemony is a sort of deception in which the individual forgets her own desires and accepts dominant values as their own. For example, someone might think that going to college is the right and necessary step in every life, when in reality their belief is socially constructed. Literature, then, may be seen as something that both reinforces dominant values and occasionally calls them into question. For example, nineteenth century women writers of sentimental fiction used certain narrative conventions merely to reinforce dominant values, whereas a writer like Jane Austen used many of the same conventions to undermine the same dominant values. His writings were collected partly in *Prison Notebooks*.

**5.3.7 Raymond Williams (1921-1988)** : *Culture and Society* (1958), in which Williams traced the idea of culture as it developed in England between 1780 and 1950, was probably more influential than any other book in breaking down the conventional categories of postwar English criticism. The class-oriented approach to British literature continues in his *The country and the City* (1973), *Problems of Materialism and Culture* (1980) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). His social criticism is contained in *The long Revolution, Towards 2000* and other books. He sustained a level of Marxist Criticism which refused to be dislodged by new fashions as new orthodoxies.

**5.3.8 Terry Eagleton** : Althusser and Macherey changed the direction of Marxist criticism and Terry Eagleton, the British Marxist critic, directly felt their effect in his major theoretical study *Criticism and Ideology* (1976). Eagleton was greatly influenced by Louis Althusser's attempt to divest Marxism of Hegelian elements and to promote its scientific status. He argued that criticism must assume a scientific position beyond the domain of ideology. In this text Eagleton formulated the fundamental categories of Marxist criticism, and

insisted that the text is a producer of ideology. However, Eagleton goes part of the way with Macherey in agreeing that ideology being put to work within a text exposes the gaps and silences is that ideology which can be made to speak. However, he is unhappy with Macherey's concept of 'absence', which he sees as "an essentially negative conception of the text's relation to history". He believes that it is still possible to preserve a direct relation between text and history by means of a complex series of mediations that govern the relation between text and history. He recognises that history can be present in the text only as ideology, so that reality in the text is therefore 'pseudo-reality', but he believes there can be a 'science of ideological formations.' and that one can study 'the laws of the production of ideological discourses as literature.' Thus, in looking at a writer such as George Eliot, he sees her work as an attempt 'to resolve a structural conflict between two forms of mid-Victorian ideology'—a belief in individualism taking irresponsible forms—so that 'the historical contradictions at the heart of Eliot's fiction are recast into ideologically resolvable terms.' Eagleton's later work turned somewhat away from Althusser and was inspired instead by Walter Benjamin's revolutionary thought. It also engaged in a sustained dialogue with many branches of recent literary theory, including feminism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Eagleton skillfully situated these currents within their historical and political contexts, revealing the ways in which they were subversive of, and complicit with, liberal humanism in its manifold guises. An instance of this can be had in his book *William Shakespeare* (1986) in which he writes of *Antony and Cleopatra* : "What deconstructs political order in the play is desire, and the figure for this is Cleopatra ... She is, as it were, pure heterogeneity, an 'infinite variety' which eludes any stable position." Eagleton's *Literary Theory : An Introduction* (1983) has commanded a wide audience in both Britain and America, and he is undoubtedly the most widely read Marxist critic now living. Overall, his work has clarified the relationship of Marxism to other discourses ; it has revaluated the tradition of Marxist criticism itself, and it has articulated a Marxist model of aesthetics both theoretically and in application.

**5.3.9 Fredric Jameson** : Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981), is possibly, the most ambitious Marxist critical study of the past thirty years. According to W. R. Goodman, in his *Contemporary Literary Theory*, Jameson has strong sympathies with the Hegelian Marxist tradition as exemplified in the work of Lukacs but he attempts an ambitious reconciliation of Lukacs with Althusserian Marxism in a totalizing criticism that can also embrace non-Marxist critical perspectives, such as formalism, archetypal criticism,

structuralism and post-structuralism. He sees Marxism as a “master code” which underlines all other forms of criticism. Even the most detailed formalist or textual analysis, he argues, is governed by a philosophy of history even if critics are unaware of it. Like Eagleton, Jameson does not want to give up the idea that all levels of the superstructure are essentially similar in structure to the economic base and directly determined by it. He argues that such a concept still functions in Althusser’s theory. Working with an implicitly psychoanalytical model, Jameson sees history as an “absent cause” since it does not exist separately from its products, and as history cannot be separated from politics it functions as a “political unconscious.” Jameson, like Althusser and Macherey, does not regard ideologies as forms of false consciousness, but as “strategies of containment” which repress knowledge of the contradictions which are the product of history, history for him being driven by the “collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity.” Works of art are the most complex products of ideologies as strategies of containment and the Marxist critic’s role is to restore “to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history.” Works of art for Jameson have developed complex strategies to deny the exploitation and oppression which is the reality of history since Jameson accepts Walter Benjamin’s dictum that “[t]here has never been a document of culture which was not at one and the same time a document of barbarism.” The Marxist critic looks for clues and symptoms which reveal the way : literary texts evade the realities of history or refuse to acknowledge contradictions. Since history is an absent cause and so not directly accessible except in textual form, “our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.”

---

#### **5.4.0 Marxism and other theories**

---

Marxist literary criticism may be thought of as a reaction to many of the rigid theories of the New Critics. Unlike the New Critics, who saw the text as a self-contained whole, Marxists generally focus upon the unresolved tensions within works of literature. Similarly, although Marxist criticism has both influenced and been influenced by structuralist criticism and post- structuralist criticism, it greatly differs from them in its refusal to separate literature and language from society. Marxist criticism is materialist, so it has more in common with theories that focus upon how literature functions within social, political and economic structures, than it does with theories that focus only upon the text. Marxist criticism has had an enormous influence on feminism, new historicism, and most recently, cultural studies.

---

### 5.4.1 Marxism and Russian Formalism

---

During the earlier half of the twentieth century, a number of critics in Soviet Union attempted to combine Marxist theory with Russian Formalist criticism. These critics were associated with Mikhail Bakhtin, who, though not apparently a committed Marxist himself, cooperated with these critics to produce some important studies, notably *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928) with P.N. Medvedev and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) with Valentin Voloshinov. Though these studies are critical of a purely formalist approach to literature (one which focuses on style, technique and literary devices rather than meaning or content), they believe that it is possible to combine Marxism and formalism dialectically in what Bakhtin and Medvedev call a sociological poetics'. With the emergence of the Stalinist era in the Soviet Union, this literary critical approach was suppressed.

---

### 5.4.2 Marxism and Feminism

---

The Marxist feminist approach to literature deserves mention, in this context, which lays emphasis on the relations between capitalism and the oppression of women *in* capitalist relations of production.

While the Marxist critics see the social reality in terms of historical struggle, the fundamental concept of historical materialism being the contradiction between the forces and social relations of material production, the feminist critics see society as a patriarchal structure and try to expose the gender discrimination that perpetuates masculine dominance over the feminine. In this context Marxist-feminist approach involves an emphasis on the relations between capitalism and the oppression of women in capitalist relations of production. Kate Millet, a radical feminist, argues that our society is a patriarchy in which the rule of women by men is "more rigorous than class, stratification," and she implies that class division is relevant only to men, meaning that the class division in the case of women is more illusory than real. It has also been argued that the unpaid labour of women at home serves to reproduce both the forces and the relations of production. The feminists insist that Marxism should take account of women's oppression and sexual division of labour which, they hold, are embedded in capitalist relations of production.



---

### 5.5.0 Conclusion

---

Thus, recent developments in Marxist criticism have uprooted Marxism from being a fixed system and moved it forward through dialectical confrontations with other forms of thought, such as psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism and feminism, with the result that even at a time when Marxist politics is in crisis as a result of the break-up of the Soviet Union and the world is fast changing due to global socio-economic reforms, Marxist criticism still remains a force in modern critical theory and practice.

---

#### Review questions :

---

1. What is the Marxian concept of literature?
2. State the basic assumption of the Marxist-feminist approach to literature.
3. What are the recent developments in Marxist criticism?
4. What do you know about the Marxist critical activities in America?
5. Name some of the major Marxist critics. What is their contribution to the field of literary criticism?
6. How does Louis Althusser differ from the other Marxist critics?
7. Write short notes on the following :
  - a) Base and Superstructure,
  - b) Marxism and Russian Formalism,
  - c) Fredric Jameson.

---

## **Unit—6 Feminist Criticism**

---

### **Feminist Criticism Unit-6**

#### **6.0. Aims and Objectives**

**6.1. Women's Studies : An introduction**

**6.2. Feminist Theory and Criticism : The First wave**

**6.2.1. Virginia Woolf**

**6.2.2. De Beauvoir**

**6.3. Feminist Theory and Criticism : The Second wave**

**6.3.1. Experience Economic Milieu**

**6.3.2. Biology**

**6.3.3. Discourse**

**6.3.4. The Unconscious**

**6.4. Marxist Feminism/Materialist Feminism**

**6.4.1. Firestone**

**6.4.2. Ruthven**

**6.4.3. Mitchell**

**6.4.4. Barrett**

**6.4.5. Coward, Belsey**

**6.4.6. Moi**

**6.4.7. Kaplan & Chakravorty Spivak**

**6.5. Gynocriticism and Women's Writing**

**6.5.1. Feminist and Female Stages**

**6.5.2. Objectives : Showaster**

**6.5.3. Gilbert and Gubar : Theory**

**6.5.4. Gilbert and Gubar : Theoretical Models**

**6.6. Poststructuralist Feminism/French Feminist Critical Theories**

**6.6.1. Cixous**

**6.6.2. Irigaray**

**6.6.3. Kristeva**

**6.6.4. Wittig (wittig) and Butler**



---

## 6.0. Aims and Objectives :

---

Feminist criticism has always been concerned with the impact of gender-bias on reading and writing. It usually begins with a critique of the ubiquitous patriarchal culture. It is concerned also with the place of female writers in the canon. Finally, it includes a search for a feminine theory or approach to texts. Feminist criticism is often revisionist. Feminism uncovers the ways in which social and cultural assumptions and structures are shaped by gender. By focusing on the extent to which traditional questions, theories and analyses have failed to take gender into account, Women's Studies (as a field) adopts a scholarly and critical perspective toward the experiences of women.

The objectives of Women's Studies include :

- finding out about women by raising new questions and accepting women's perceptions and experiences as real and significant ;
- correcting misconceptions about women and identifying ways in which traditional methodologies may distort our knowledge ;
- theorizing about the place of women in society and appropriate strategies for change ;
- examining the diversity of women's experiences and the ways in which class, race, psycho-social perspectives, sexual orientation and other variables intersect with gender.

Although studying women is its starting point, by uncovering the ways in which social and cultural assumptions and structures are shaped by gender, one must not forget that Women's Studies also studies men and the world around us.

# Feminist Criticism

---

## 6.1. Women's Studies—An Introduction

---

Women, like men, have always been a part of the human species and in all ages they have made up fifty percent of the human populace. The position of women however in the cultural matrix of the west has amazingly, never been equal to that of men. Women have been looked upon as inferior beings, subordinates in a totality where the two component parts—male and female—are necessary and complementary to each other. The relation of the two sexes has always been asymmetrical. The term *Man* in general represents the all-

embracing term *Human*. Man is positive as well as neutral. *Woman*, on the other hand, is someone who is not a man, she is something negative, she is a person who is lacking in certain positive qualities—physical, moral and intellectual. This view has lasted till date down the ages, right from ancient times. Womanhood has been seen as a disadvantage, as is evident in the morning hymns of Jew is men : “Blessed be God... that he did not make me a woman.” The Bible states that Eve was created by God for Adam for his pleasure and to fill his loneliness. Aristotle said that : “The female is a female by virtue of a lack of certain qualities” and that “we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.” St Thomas Aquinas, thinking along the same lines called woman “an imperfect man.” In Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* Athena grants victory after Apollo’s argument that the mother has no rights of parenthood on her child. This victory asserts the rule of male principles over the sensuality of the female Furies—in other words, the rule of patriarchy over matriarchy. John Milton’s personal conception of woman’s status and capacities is found in *Paradise Lost*, Book IV. Adam and Eve are created : “He for God only, she for God in him” (1.299). Eve calls Adam her : “author and disposer, what thou biddest / Unargued I obey ; so God ordains :/ God is thy law, thou mine...” (1.635-637). It is astonishing that woman’s dependence has been thrust on her by men, it has not been the result of a socio-cultural change or a historical one. This shows that women have been inferiorized by culture and / or acculturated into inferiority.

---

## 6.2. Feminist Theory and Criticism : The First Wave

---

Feminism developed as a formidable force, in America and in Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The main impetus for feminist criticism came from the Women’s Liberation movement focusing on Women’s Rights and Women’s Suffrage. Anglo American feminism of the early twentieth century was a reflex of these first-wave preoccupations. Around this time, many feminists were working and writing—Olive Schreiner, Elizabeth Robins, Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield, Rebecca West, Ray Strachey, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, Virginia Woolf ‘the founding mother of the contemporary debate’ in Mary Eagleton’s phrase, and Simone de Beauvoir.

**3.2. Virginia Woolf :** Virginia Woolf offered the most important literary-critical model to feminists interested in recovering the experience of women writers. *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) can be looked upon as two key texts which are major contributions to feminist theory. The

first text, *A Room of One's Own*, focuses on the history and social context of women's literary production. It gives an account of the frustrations that a fictional female researcher must go through to arrive at a theory of women and fiction. The prevalent gender bias hampers her access to the resources of the university, and historical and imaginative male accounts of woman, whether distorted by anger or by the imagination, fail history and experience. Woolf imagined historical woman writers in their social contexts and searched out the sources of the bitterness she read in their works. The second text, *Three Guineas*, examines the relations between male power and the professions of education, law, medicine among others and also analyses militarism, fascism and legal injustice as derivatives of patriarchy and early sexual division within the family. Jane Marcus, one of the active editors of Woolf collections, identifies Woolf as a socialist feminist. Like Lillian Robinson in *Sex, Class and Culture*, Marcus asserts the importance of Woolf's radical feminist work *Three Guineas* although Woolf herself disavowed the label feminist in her text. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf advanced the notion that women indeed are victims of men but they too become schemers by acting as looking glasses which reflect back to men their desired image and thus add to both domestic and professional victimization.

Woolf as a major contributor to the feminist movement, recognized that gender-identity has always been socially constructed and needs to be challenged and transformed and she also examined the problems facing women writers because women have always faced social and economic obstacles when it came to the question of literary ambitions. Toril Moi is of the opinion that Woolf was not interested in a balance between masculine and feminine types but in a total displacement of fixed gender-identities. Woolf aimed at discovering linguistic ways of portrayal of the confined Life of women and she advocated her belief that when women finally achieved socio-economic equality, nothing would prevent them from developing their artistic talents.

**6.2.2 De Beauvoir :** Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949, trans., 1953) is another trend-setting text. Coming from a French feminist and a pro-abortion and women's-rights activist, the text is an academic study that examines women from the perspectives of biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism, a feature in the first wave. The book slips over to the second wave feminism with its assertion of men's biological, psychological and economic discrimination against women. It traces the history of women from nomadic to twentieth-century Western culture, reviews their treatment by five literary authors and analyses their situations in contemporary life.

*The Second Sex* distinguishes between biological sex and socially constructed gender and posits the destruction of patriarchy goading women to break out of men's objectification. Simone de Beauvoir viewed the relative yet hierarchical structure of gender in Western culture. She had a classic exposition of alterity (of woman as the 'Other'). Woman, she wrote, is "defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her.....He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (xvi). The alterity of woman she said, was an effect of androcentrism: "The categories in which men think of the world are established from their point of view, as absolute. ... A mystery for man, woman is considered to be mysterious in essence" (257). De Beauvoir boldly stated that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267), a being whose body and "relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself (725). In other words, womanhood is thrust upon her in accordance with patriarchal standards and not by her own preference. Women, she said, will achieve liberation only through their own agency or "positive action [in] human society" (678).

---

### **6.3 Feminist Theory and Criticism : The Second Wave**

---

Second wave feminism continued to share the first wave's fight for women's rights covering all areas, but it focused primarily on the politics of reproduction, to women's experiences and sexual differences. Women's sexuality as a form of oppression came under scrutiny. Sexual difference came under five main foci : biology, experience, discourse, the unconscious and economic milieu.

---

#### **6.3.1 Experience and Economic Milieu :**

---

A decade after De Beauvoir, Betty Friedan came up with *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). This book analysed the situation of middle-class and upper-class women in the United States and Friedan found them suffering from a serious 'problem without a name'. Friedan noticed that as men acted in the world and women retreated to the home in the 1940s and 50s, men were empowered and women infantilised. She argued that women suffered "a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique" (77). This mystique was a complaisant femininity that made women economically, intellectually and emotionally dependent upon husbands. Women continued to be told that a woman's place is in the home when Man's place was in the world that was widening. Women began to be left behind again because men continued to control their destinies with the help of their minds, that part of

the anatomy, which became dormant again in the case of women. Betty Friedan stated :

Women also had minds. They also had the human need to grow. But the work that fed life and moved it forward was no longer done at home, and women were not trained to understand and work in the world. Confined to the home, a child among her children, passive, no part of her existence under her own control, a woman could only exist by pleasing man. She was wholly dependent on her protection in a world that she had no share in making : man's world. She could never grow up to ask the simple human question, "Who am I? What do I want?" ...She was, at that time, so completely defined as object by man, never herself as subject, "I", that she was not even expected to enjoy or participate in the act of sex. "He took his pleasure with her...he had his way with her," as the sayings went. (81)

Friedan felt that even if fathers tried to get sons to be "masculine," to be-independent, active and strong, both parents often encouraged their daughters to be passive, weak and grasping dependence known as "femininity," expecting her, to find "security" in a boy, never expecting her to live her own life.

Friedan's analysis was liberal in focusing on the identities of privileged women but more importantly also radical in criticizing the so-called liberal institutions—Freudian psychoanalysis, functionalist social science and sex-differentiated education offered in most universities, consumerism—all of which supported complementary sex roles. Revealing the frustrations of white, heterosexual American women without careers and trapped in the domestic sphere, Friedan for the first time put feminism on the national agenda. She went on to found NOW or the National Organisation of Women in 1966.

Second-wave feminism was thus dominated by certain bold themes—the omnipresence of patriarchal oppression, the insufficiency for women of existing political organizations and the celebration of women's difference as central to the cultural politics of liberation. It led to the critical reassessment of socialism and psychoanalysis and to the radical feminism of Kate Millett and lesbian-feminism of Adrienne Rich. It also led to the emergence of Anglo-American criticism and to the 'gynocriticism' of Showalter. The contradiction between female life and authorship was the subject of papers given by two prominent American women writers—Tillie Olsen and Adrienne Rich—at a 1971 forum sponsored by the MLA Commission on the Status of Women and later published in *College English* (1972). Olsen enumerated the experiences that prevented women from writing and movingly recounted the obstacles to

her own creativity: Raising four children, working at a job, and keeping house, she wrote in snatches during bus rides from work or in the deep night hours for as long as she could stay awake ("Silences : When Writers Don't Write," *Images* 110). Rich also adverted to her own experiences : she was a daughter writing for her father, a poet learning her craft from male poets, a mother jotting fragments while her children slept, a woman who thought the choice was between love and egotism. "Re-vision," she argued, the act of seeing text and life "with fresh eyes," was more than a feminist critical method ; it was "an act of survival" (18). A radical feminist literary criticism would take the text as a clue to "how we have been living, ...how our language has trapped as well as liberated us," and "how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh" (18). The point was "not to pass on a [patriarchal] tradition but to break its hold over us" (19).

---

### 6.3.2 Biology :

---

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) consisted of "equal parts of literary and cultural criticism" (xii) verging toward political theory. Millett was a movement activist and doctoral student when she wrote this book as a dissertation. Defining sexual politics as the "arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (23), she analysed the politics—ideological, biological, social, economic, educational, religious, psychological and physical—that maintained the system of patriarchy. She announced her view of patriarchy that subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male and asserted that patriarchy exerts power directly or indirectly in domestic as well as civic life to constrain women. Millett distinguished between sex which is biologically determined and gender as a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity. She attacked social scientists who view culturally learned 'female' characteristics as 'natural'. The acting out of these gender-roles perpetuated in women's magazines and in family ideology which have always led to unequal and hierarchical relations between the sexes and this is what she termed "sexual politics". *Sexual Politics* was an analysis of the masculinist images of women in the historical, social and literary context. She devoted chapters to D. H. Lawrence. Henry Miller and Norman Mailer, who mythologized a machismo "cornered by the threat of a second sexual revolution" (335), and to Jean Genet, who saw how women and homosexuals challenged the heterosexual categories. For her radical analysis, Millett was attacked in both popular and academic reviews. They accused her of scholarly improprieties and reviled her *ad feminam*. *Time* dubbed her the "Mao Tse-tung of Women's Liberation," and Norman Mailer described



her as an acolyte killer with a sawed-off shotgun ("The Prisoner of Sex", *Harper's*, March 1971). Her criticism was threatening because it was so powerful : it crossed many boundaries between disciplines, cultural domains, academic and trade readers thereby effectively revealing the pervasiveness of women's oppression in Western cultures.

Katharine M. Rogers extended the tradition of *querelle* scholarship in *The Troublesome Helpmate : A History of Misogyny in Literature* (1966). Rogers defined misogyny as direct and indirect "expressions of hatred, fear, or contempt of womankind" (xii). Her study revealed its pervasiveness in every genre—epics, lyrics, tragedies, novels, tracts, sermons, manuals and in every period from the biblical to the contemporary. Similarly, Eva Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) maintained that patriarchal attitudes toward women, though they were transmuted, survived intellectual change. In a critique of European thinkers—G. W. F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Otto Weininger, she explored the connections between will and sexual domination, sexism and racism, the categorical absolutism of German philosophy and the politics of the Third Reich.

While Friedan, Millet and others protested against the biological destiny carved out for women some radical feminists however, viewed women's biological attributes as sources of superiority rather than inferiority. They appealed to the special experience of being a woman as the source of positive female values in life and in art. Elaine Showalter, focused on the literary representation of the sexual differences in women's writing. Taking a historical approach, Elaine Showalter contended that women writers had been forcibly alienated from their experiences. She found that nineteenth-century women were prohibited from writing what did not correspond to femininity and were loathed for doing so. Twentieth-century women, in turn, were trivialized for their portrayal of female experience, while male writers were admired for their "ruthless appropriation of life for their art" ("Women Writers and the Female Experience," *Radical Feminism* 400). How we explained the contradiction thus : "Traditionally, a man's life is his work; a woman's life is her man. That a woman's life might have connections with her work is a revolutionary idea in that it might—indeed, must—lead her to examine and question her place as woman in the social order" ("Feminism," *Images* 254). Several studies of Mary Ellmann's in *Thinking About Women* as well as of Showlater's detailed the receptions of female-authored texts. The violent reception accorded to *Jane Eyre* was owing to its presentation of female passion and independence, thus making the sex of the author paramount in assessing it. "Many critics," Showalter noted, "bluntly admitted that they thought the book was a masterpiece if written by a man, shocking or disgusting if written

by a woman" ("Women Writers and the Double Standard," *Woman in Sexist Society* 341). Carol Ohmann, in the same vein, discovered that reviewers who assumed *Wuthering Heights* was male-authored attributed power, originality and clarity to it, while those who knew it was female-authored considered it an interesting addition to the tradition of women's novels in England. Ohmann found "considerable correlation between what readers assume or know the sex of the writer to be and what they actually see, or neglect to see, in 'his' or her work" ("Emily Bronte in the Hands of Male Critics," *College English* 909).

**6.3.3 Discourse :** The female socio-linguist Robin Lakoff in *Language and Women's Place* (1975) stated that women's language too is inferior as it contains patterns of weakness, uncertainty, focusing on the trivial—the unserious, the frivolous, stressing on personal emotional responses. Dale Spender in his *Man Made Language* (1980) saw women oppressed by a male-dominated language. This is in tune with Foucault's argument that what is 'true' depends on who controls discourse and thus, it becomes apparent that it is natural for women to be trapped inside a world of male-truth'.

---

#### **6.3.4 The Unconscious :**

---

The psycho-analytic theories of Lacan and Kristeva provided the focus on the unconscious as discussed in unit 2.

---

### **6.4. Marxist Feminism / Materialist Feminism**

---

Although feminists and socialists have engaged in continuous conversations since the nineteenth century, those crosscurrents within literary theory that might be designated "materialist feminism" have their origins in the late 1960s with various attempts to synthesize feminist politics with Marxist analyses. Early work on this projected alliance directed itself, not to questions of literary criticism and theory, but to the problem of bringing feminist questions of gender and sexuality into some form of strategic dialogue with class analysis. In keeping with subsequent developments within the women's movement, the materialist feminist problematic has extended to questions of race, nationality or ethnicity, lesbianism and bisexuality, cultural identity, including religion and the very definition of power. Writers in the United States and the United Kingdom sometimes acknowledge the influence of French feminists such as Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig but have yet to engage fully with the critiques of Marxist theory being constructed by feminists working in other international locations.

The very term “materialist feminisms” proves controversial, since there has been little general consensus whether women’s interests can, or indeed should, be addressed in terms of traditional socialist and Marxist formulas. In the United Kingdom, Juliet Mitchell’s groundbreaking essay “Women : The Longest Revolution” (1966), which she expanded to book length in *Woman’s Estate* (1971), initiated the revision of traditional Marxist accounts by analysing the position of women in terms not only of relations of production and private property but also of psychoanalytically based theories of sexuality and gender. Michele Barrett’s highly influential *Women’s Oppression Today* (1980) insisted that the way forward for feminists will necessarily involve direct engagement with and transformation of Marxist class analysis. In their editorial to the final issue of the important UK journal *m/f* (1978-86), Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie adopted a more extreme position, stating, “As socialist-feminists we were, opposed to the much discussed union of Marxism and feminism” and sought instead “to problematize the notion of sexual difference itself” through a fundamental critique of psychoanalytic categories (3). These differences should be understood as both intellectual and representative of a specific context of partisan disputes within the British Left. The situation however, differed in the United States, where, largely working outside the pressures of party politics but constrained by the memory of Joseph McCarthy, feminists as diverse as Lise Vogel, Zillah Eisenstein, Nancy Hartsock and Donna Haraway identified themselves as “socialist feminists,” thereby distinguishing their work from that of radical and liberal feminists, who contended that women’s oppression will end with the achievement of women’s power, or women’s equality, within existing capitalist societies, positions strangely like the traditional Marxist view that women’s oppression would end once women entered into production. The importance of these critical positions and developments for feminist literary theory and criticism arises from their foundations in political theory, psychoanalysis and sociology rather than from traditional literary concerns with questions of canon, form, genre, author and *oeuvre*. Materialist feminist literary critics focus instead on key problems in language, history, ideology, determination, subjectivity and agency from the basic perspective of a critique of the gendered character of class and race relations under international capitalism.

---

### **3.4.1. Firestone :**

---

Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex : The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) combined De Beauvoir’s critiques of Freudian psychoanalysis and historical materialism with analyses of such cultural themes as romance. She

regarded male domination as primary and quite independent of other forms of oppression—social and economic. Her theoretical aim was to substitute sex for class as the primary determinant in history. She represented the class-struggle as a product of the patriarchal family unit. Instead of analogizing from race to sex, as some feminists had done, she declared that “racism is a sexual phenomenon” (122) and examined the relations of both categories in terms of a nuclear family engaged in Oedipal dramas and capitalist transactions.

---

#### **6.4.2. Ruthven :**

---

Marxist feminism’s primary aim was to open up the complex relations between gender and the economy. K.K. Ruthven in *Feminist Literary Studies : An Introduction* observed :

In *The Origin of the Family* (1884) Engels bypasses the problem of primacy by arguing that ‘the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male’, thus legitimating the familiar equation of the husbands with the bourgeoisie and wives with the proletariat. Any social system in which a Marxist analysis uncovers oppressive practices becomes metaphorical in feminist rhetoric of the oppression of women : class, race, slavery and colonisation furnish the dominant tropes of oppression. If male-female relations are construed in class terms, for instance, men are always the ruling class.

Firestone’s approach was markedly integrative at a time when many leftists saw no connection between the classicism or racism they opposed and women’s oppression. Firestone pointed at the need for a psychosocial synthesis.

---

#### **3.4.3 Mitchell :**

---

The significance of Juliet Mitchell’s work for feminist literary theory is indirect yet fundamental. Initially trained as a literary scholar, Mitchell focused on questions concerning the family and child rearing by means of a feminist critique of psychoanalytic theories of sexual development largely based upon a literary-critical examination of texts within the Freudian and Marxist canons. Mitchell’s project, continued in her influential *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) and *Women : The Longest Revolution* (1984), which reprints her 1966 essay alongside exemplary studies of literary texts, inflects feminist politics with insights from Marxism and psychoanalysis. With Jacqueline Rose (in

their edition of Jacques Lacan's *Feminine Sexuality : Jacques Lacan and the "ecole freudienne,"* 1982), she continued the engagement between the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and materialist feminist thinking in Britain. Working from the Freudian principle that "the fate of the adult personality can be largely decided in the initial months of life" and the Marxist principle of dialectical materialism that "human society is, and always will be, full of contradictions" (*Woman's Estate* 118, 90), Mitchell criticized "the voluntarist underestimation of the great difficulty of psychic change," since, she argued, "the best-cared for child has a caretaker who has grown up with problems—this will always be the case. And these problems will be transmitted in an uneven way" (McRobbie 87). Mitchell's consistent emphasis upon critically reading Marxist, Freudian, and Lacanian discourses on sexuality and socialization leads to questions of ideology and literary representation that are of considerable importance for such feminist literary studies as Jacqueline Rose's *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (1986) and Jane Gallop's *The Daughters Education : Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1982), which takes *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* as its "point of departure" (xiii).

---

#### 6.4.4. Barrett :

---

For a sociologist of knowledge like Michele Barrett, literary questions were contingent rather than central. Her treatment of ideology in *Women's Oppression Today*, however, has been highly influential among feminist literary theorists. According to Barrett, the political urgencies of women's liberation bear directly on the need for a feminist analysis of "culture," and it is here that the problematic relationship of Marxism and feminism engages questions important to literary theory, in particular questions of aesthetics, subjectivity and ideology. In "Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics," her 1980 lecture to the Communist University of London, Barrett addressed three issues of direct importance to materialist feminist literary theory- 1) the indeterminacy of artistic and literary meaning, 2) the relationship between women's art and feminist art, and 3) the problem of judging aesthetic value and pleasure. Barrett focused on the literary problem of "signification," the "systems of signs . . . through which meaning is constructed, represented, consumed and reproduced" (38). Artistic and literary meanings are determinable but not fixed, since meaning "may depend on who is reading or receiving . . . and how they do so" (39). This was not an argument for total indeterminacy, however, since for Barrett every work does carry a "dominant, or preferred, reading" (42) that limits the range of possible meanings. Barrett regarded literary texts, art objects, and dramatic performances as marked by

inner contradictions that cannot easily be adjudicated by reference to the artist's life or intentions. She agreed with Rosalind Coward that women's art is not necessarily feminist, since feminism "is an alignment of political interests and not a shared female experience" (42), but was reluctant to follow Coward and abandon female experience entirely. Barrett approached the question as to how we distinguish cultural production in general from "art" within the framework of a historical materialist critique of ideology: "It is only the degradation of work under capitalist relations of production, including the degree to which workers have been stripped of mental control over their labour, that makes us perceive such a huge gulf between work and what we call 'creative' work" (48-49). Arguing that feminists ignore the dual question of 'aesthetic value and pleasure to their peril, Barrett found the traditional assumption that value judgments can and should be made a highly suspicious assumption for feminist politics, since such judgments about "value" invariably tend to reinforce the values of the dominant classes as apparently natural and universal. Barrett's materialist aesthetics was a seeking to democratise the relation between the producer and the consumer of art. Skills, though socially defined, are not innate but acquired and therefore improvable, while the imaginative rendering of social life in works of art and literature is typically foreclosed in much feminist criticism by an undue emphasis upon the work's content as unmediated representation. Politics came first for Barrett, since literature and art help constitute social life but do not determine it: "Cultural politics, and feminist art, are important precisely because we are not the helpless victims of oppressive ideology. We take some responsibility for the cultural meaning of gender and it is up to us all to change it" (58).

---

#### 6.4.5 Coward, Belsey :

---

If for Barrett questions of literature, art, and aesthetic pleasure were important but not determining—there remained those "more fundamental changes" to be worked out. For Rosalind Coward, Catherine Belsey, Toril Moi and Cora Kaplan the critical study of literary texts became of primary importance to the development and enunciation of a feminist politics firmly committed to socialism. In *Patriarchal Precedents* (1983), Coward critically historicized from a feminist perspective the various disciplines within which sexual relations have traditionally been studied. For Coward, Lacan's observation that the unconscious is structured like a language provided the basis for a materialist feminist approach to Semiotics that addressed how different forms of popular culture help construct gendered social subjects in ways that perpetuate oppressive social relations *Female Desire*, 1984). Belsey's *Critical Practice* (1980)

argued that “the recurrent suppression of the role of language” in traditional literary criticism is an ideological move by which the “‘correct’ reading” of a text installs the reader as “transcendent subject addressed by an autonomous and authoritative author” (55). Belsey developed this bringing together of Lacanian and Althusserian theories of the subject in *The Subject of Tragedy* (1987), which rereads English Renaissance drama from a materialist feminist perspective, arguing that the emergence of liberal ideologies during the capitalist era has required the “interpellation” of women as, in part, willing subjects of their own oppression in relation to a normative and universal male Self. This critique of liberal humanism emphasized the political importance of history, as well as the need for readings of literary texts against the grain of their ideological commitments.

---

#### 6.4.6 Moi :

---

Moi’s *Sexual / Textual Politics* (1985) challenged the humanist presuppositions informing the influential feminist literary criticism of Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Annette Kolodny and Myra Jehlen. In their antisexist focus on female authors and readers, Moi contended, feminist literary critics adopt what Marcia Holly calls a “noncontradictory perception of the world” (10) that mystifies rather than disables patriarchal assumptions by positing for itself a place outside ideology. Celebrating women writers and readers as such re-inscribe the unitary self and thereby beg the political questions of agency and resistance, “of how it is that some women manage to counter patriarchal strategies despite the odds stacked against them” (64).

---

#### 6.4.7 Kaplan and Chakravorty Spivak :

---

In Kaplan’s work, and in that of Mary Jacobus and Penny Boumelha, the collective interest “in developing a Marxist feminist analysis of literature” (61) continued, producing class-sensitive critiques of sexual ideology in various literary texts of the post-industrial era in contrast to Belseys focus on the literature of the early capitalist period. Kaplan wrote that her experience in the collective enabled her to overcome her fear of “theory,” an antipathy that persisted among the U.S. feminist literary critics. Not all US feminist critics, however, shared this fear. Some of the most important US contributions to materialist feminist criticism came from socialists and feminists working

directly with the interrelated literary problems of sexuality, racial difference, the politics of language, and postcoloniality, questions barely addressed by U.K. materialist feminists.

The essays in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *In Other Worlds* (1987) and the interviews in *The Post-Colonial Critic : Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (ed. Sarah Harasym, 1990) emphasized the complicities and dangerous instabilities of "class," "gender" and "race" among the analytical languages needed to negotiate a global politics that will destabilize the continuing logic of capitalism in the contemporary postcolonial era.

---

## 6.5 Gynocriticism and Women's Writing :

---

In *A Literature of Their Own*, (1977) Elaine Showalter viewed the literary history of women writers, many of whom were hidden from the male-dominated history of canonical texts as it were. She traced a history which showed the configuration of their material, psychological and ideological determinants. Her study promoted both a feminist critique as well as gyno-criticism as it was concerned with women writers. She examined British women novelists since the Bronte sisters from the point-of-view of women's experience. Though she pointed at no innate female-sexuality or female-imagination, she nonetheless found a profound difference between women's and men's writings. She pointed at the fact that a whole tradition of female writing has always been neglected by male critics. She argued that literary subcultures all go through three major phases of development. For literature by or about women, she labelled these stages the Feminine, Feminist and Female. Showalter's dates are not to be taken rigidly ; they overlap, and multiple phases can be seen in a single writer. Critical of the practice of selecting only great figures for analysis, in an appendix she listed two hundred and thirteen women writers with "sociological" data, writers who provide diversity and generational links. She also avoided concepts of female imagination, preferring to look at the ways "the self-awareness of the woman writer has translated itself into a literary form in a specific place and time-span" and to trace this self-awareness within the tradition (12).



---

### 6.5.1 Feminine, Feminist and Female Stages :

---

The first, the Feminine Stage (1840-1880) involves “imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition” and “internalization of its standards” that is, male aesthetic standards. Her “feminine” phase includes intense, compact, symbolic fiction that used “innovative and covert ways to dramatize the inner life” (27-28), as well as “an all-inclusive female realism” that was “a broad, socially informed exploration of the daily lives and values of women within the family and the community” (29). This included George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell who stuck to the immediate social and domestic circle and suffered pangs of guilt for their commitments to authorship. They also avoided coarseness and sensuality thereby abiding to limitations of expression.

The second, the Feminist Stage (1880-1920) involves “protest against these standards and values and advocacy of minority rights”. “Feminists” confronted Victorian sexual stereotypes, produced socialistic theories of women’s relationships to work, class, and the family, and entertained an “all-out war of the sexes” (29). This phase, she said, includes radical feminist writers as Elizabeth Robins and Olive Schreiner who protested against male double-standards and male values and fantasized sexual separatism in Amazonian or suffragette communities.

The third, the Female Stage (1920 onwards) inherited characteristics of the former phases and also developed the idea of specifically female writing and female experience in a “phase of self-discovery, a turning inwards freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity.” Early parts of the “female” phase of self-exploration were seen by Showalter as carrying “the double legacy of feminine self-hatred and feminist withdrawal” (33). The phase polarized sexuality, but the female sensibility moved from sacred to self-destructive and paradoxically failed to confront the female body. The concept of androgyny, explored from the Greeks to Bloomsbury in male as well as female authors by Carolyn Heilbrun (*Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, 1973), came under attack as an escapist “flight” in Showalter’s controversial handling of Woolf (263-97). The phase of the female novelists since 1960 operates in Freudian and Marxist contexts and for the first time accepts anger and sexuality as “sources of female creative power” (35).

---

## 6.5.2 Objectives : Showalter :

---

“Gynocritics is the name Elaine Showalter has given to those critics who wish “to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories” (“Toward a Feminist Poetics,” *New Feminist Criticism* 131). Showalter increasingly showed willingness to talk about various schools of feminist theory. She found the social theory of subcultures useful to gynocriticism in “Feminist Theory in the Wilderness.” In “Critical Cross-Dressing,” she showed scepticism about the ability of prominent male critics, Jonathan Culler and Terry Eagleton, in particular, to turn feminist as readers without surrendering their “paternal privileges.” What she feared was that “instead of breaking out of patriarchal bounds,” they will merely compete with women, failing to acknowledge women’s feminist contributions (143). She included feminist aesthetics and French feminism in the introduction to her edited collection *The New Feminist Criticism* and began talking more about men through the category of gender in her later edited collection *Speaking of Gender*.

Feminist freedom from, male theory was a goal for Showalter, but its accomplishment remains problematic in critiques of gynocritics’ practices. For example, Myra Jehlen found the self-contained gynocritical position problematic. She felt that, if, like Archimedes, the feminist shifts the world, she must position her fulcrum on male ground—she cannot work from a totally female stance. In “Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism,” Jehlen advocated attending to confrontations along the long border conditional to dominant male traditions, achieving what she called “radical comparativism.” Jehlen’s isolation of politics from aesthetics in literature was regarded as suspect by Toril Moi, although both critics attend to unconscious ideology. By the late 1970s, major female-centred studies had begun to appear. In *Literary Women* (1976), Ellen Moers expressed the intention not to impose doctrine on women writers—an attitude that resembles Showalter’s in its distrust of theory. She presented a practical, living history of women writers from the eighteenth century through the twentieth, attempting to shape it with their concerns and language. The description featured new anecdotal details and minute observations from manuscript sources, selected for their relevance to unique experiences of women. Many of the categories she used to discuss the history and tradition of women writers in the first half of her study were derived from traditional period and genre studies, for example, “The Epic Age,” “Traditions, Individual Talent,” “Realism,” and “Gothic”. In

the second half, she set out to familiarize readers with literary feminism, a heroic structure for the female voice in literature that she called “heroinism”. Her categories of heroinism incorporated characters in roles of loving, performing and educating.

---

### 6.5.3 Gilbert and Gubar : Theory :

---

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar theorized the position of woman and the literary imagination in the nineteenth (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979) and the twentieth century (*No Man's Land*, 2 volumes, 1987-89). They offered a large selection of women authors who conform to their paradigms in their edition of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985). Their approach included not just historical references to the material, social and gendered conditions of authors' lives but also to literary canons and archives, and to popular movements and artifacts—typical strengths of American feminist theory. Like Showalter, they detected historical stages of a female literary tradition, but they grounded these in male comparisons and frequently made their points through metaphors and puns, as seen in their titles.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic* they argued that key women writers since Jane Austen achieved a voice which can be called distinctively female by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards. According to them, for early nineteenth-century women writers the dominant vision of literary creativity was paternal : Women had to cope further with male fantasies of the female. These fantasies came in angelic and monstrous versions and were imposed as literary models. The madwoman or monster repeatedly created by women writers they saw as the authors double, expressing her anxiety, rage, and “schizophrenia of authorship” (*Madwoman* 78). They detected asymmetrical male and female responses to the rise of female literary power. They showed how women emerged from their liminal position in the attic to wage the battle between the sexes.

In *The War of the Words*, Volume 1 of *No Man's Land*, which offers numerous studies of male authors, the battle is manifested in tropes of erotic dueling, the advent of the “no-man” to replace the virile man, and plots of males defeating alarming forms of female sexuality through a theology of the phallus, mutilations, rapes, and campaigns against the mothers of “castrated” sons. Women begin to have literary reactions to preceding female writers, sometimes arriving at parodic or comic treatments, as well as serious and positive ones. Gilbert and Gubar's collection of stereotypes and misogynistic

plot types that progress through the decades is reminiscent of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. Women writers express belligerence less directly and render characters who are victorious through duplicity, subterfuge, or luck. The suffragist movement gives the early century metaphors of militarism and sacrifice. Modernist women offer private triumphs. Later women writers respond to male backlash with nightmares of defeat or dreams of triumphant women warriors.

Volume 2, *Sexchanges*, sustains the model of the eternal sex war refined into the consideration of sexchanges : "The sexes battle because sex roles change, but when the sexes battle, sex itself (that is eroticism) changes" (xi). Major changes include the rebellion against the feminisation of the American woman, powerful roles assumed by women in World War I, varied lesbian arrangements and transvestism. A more tortured experience of women in war emerged in Cooper, Munich, and Squier's essay collection *Arms and the Woman*.

---

#### 6.5.4 Gilbert and Gubar : Theoretical Models :

---

Two theoretical models in Gilbert and Gubar are worthy of mention. Their concept of the "anxiety of authorship," used perhaps too broadly to describe nineteenth-century women writers (like Harold Bloom's male-applied term "anxiety of influence") derives from Freud's psychosexual paradigm of the Oedipus complex. If women follow a normative female decree of the Oedipus complex, the father, that is, the male literary tradition, becomes the object of female desire, and the pre-Oedipal desire for the mother or her literature is renounced. Twentieth-century women writers, they said, have the option of the "affiliation complex," which allows them to "adopt" literary mothers and to escape the male "belatedness," or the "anxiety of influence" theorized by Bloom, which is in effect a biological imperative for literary descent from an originatory father. Normative resolution of the Oedipus complex may leave women anxious about the fragility of paternal power, worried about a usurping paternal primacy, and fearful of male vengeance. Non-normative Freudian resolutions of the Oedipus complex offer advantages to authors such as Gertrude Stein. The resulting "masculinist complex" grants autonomy, a new maternal relation, and the creative option of male mimicry—a departure from Freud's negative judgment.

Gilbert and Gubar also implicated fantasies in theory. *The War of the*

*Words* focused on linguistic fantasies, and *sexchanges* on fantasy identifications. The feminist linguistic fantasy grants an intuitive primacy in language acquisition to the mother rather than to the father. Proceeding from Woolf's remarks on women's language, Gilbert and Gubar suggested that women fantasize a revision not just of women's language but of women's relation to language. They advocated the overturning of male sentencing—the sentence as definitive—in judgment, decree or interdiction. They saw agonistic oral competitiveness and the acquisition of a privileged, priestly language, as theorized by Walter Ong, as a male fertility rite, resisting the vernacular and controlling the mother tongue. One can cite modernist men such as Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot and the deconstructionist theory of Jacques Derrida who have mystified, claimed, or transformed the mother tongue, so as to retain priestly authority. Increasingly, women writers find enabling fantasies and roles—Sappho as a predecessor, Aphrodite as an erotic authority, and transvestism as a metaphor. In the same exchanges, men express loss and failure.

---

## 6.6 Poststructuralist Feminism / French Feminist Critical Theories :

---

French feminism has been deeply influenced by psychoanalysis, particularly by Lacan's reworking of Freud. Focusing on Woman yet again as the other, French feminist theoreticians desired to break down conventional male-constructed stereotypes of sexual difference and they focused on language as the domain around which such stereotypes are structured. Barbara Johnson stated "The question of gender is a question of language" (*World* 37), and her succinct formulation of the relationship between gender and language did much to characterize the approach of a group of feminists who drew upon the discourses of poststructuralism. This kind of feminist work takes as its starting point the premise that gender difference dwells in language rather than in the referent, that there is nothing "natural" about gender itself. In placing their emphasis on language, however, these feminists were not suggesting a sort of linguistic or poetic retreat into a world made only of words. Rather, for them, language intervenes in such a manner that "materiality" is not taken to be a self-evident category, and language itself is understood as radically marked by the materiality of gender. The

poststructuralist focus on language thus raises fundamental questions that extend beyond matters of usage. They focused on the understanding of writing and the body as sites where the material and the linguistic intersect. Questioning the political and ethical grounds of language, the poststructuralist feminists considered here share a common opponent in patriarchal discourse, a feature that emerges in their readings of literature, philosophy, history and psychoanalysis. However they all counter and define patriarchal discourse in different ways.

---

### 3.6.1 Cixous :

---

Helene Cixous has contributed a valuable discussion of the consequences of what she termed the “death-dealing binary thought”. She lined up a list of binary oppositions some of which are cited below :

Where is she?  
Activity / Passivity  
Sun / Moon  
Culture / Nature  
Day / Night

Father / Mother  
Head / Heart  
Intelligible / Palpable  
Logos / Pathos  
Man / Woman

Nature / History  
Nature / Art  
Nature / Mind  
Passion / Action

Cixous showed how these binary oppositions were heavily accepted in the patriarchal value system. Each binary opposition corresponds to a hierarchy where the feminine side emerges as negative or powerless. Inevitably all oppositions get hierarchical and organisation by hierarchy makes all conceptual organisation subject to Man making him the privileged one.

Cixous’s study led in a certain way to bisexuality as man is trained for

phallic monosexuality. Cixous went on to develop what she called “feminine writing” (*écriture féminine*), envisaged in terms of bisexuality. This in turn leads to the question : “it has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and phallogentrism—bringing to light the fate dealt to woman,” how one might go about such questioning is a point of dispute (Newly 65). She affirmed that today ‘writing is woman’s’. Writing becomes the passageway, the entrance, the dwelling place and the exit of the other in the woman. She viewed the libido of woman as cosmic just as her unconscious which makes her writing endless and infinite, more so because unlike man she is not invited to social success or sublimation. Literature, said Cixous, is under the command of the philosophical and the phallogentric. She concluded that women must reject a philosophical mode of writing if they wish to write themselves, in other words, a specifically feminine discourse, and thereby resist any identification with the discourse controlled by the phallic tradition. Cixous engaged in a political project designed to create an alternative, nonphallogentric discourse. Like Wittig, Cixous turned to fiction (*Angst, Illa, Souffles*) and became concerned with getting rid of words like ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’ ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity/ and even ‘man’ and ‘woman’ (“Exchange” 129). Cixous relied heavily upon psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction.

For Cixous, the space of feminine writing cannot be theorized or defined, enclosed or encoded (“Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *New French Feminisms*, ed. Marks and de Courtivron, 253). It can, however, be understood as “the ideal harmony, reached by few, [which] would be genital, assembling everything and being capable of generosity, of spending” (“Exchange” 131). Feminine writing is also the province of metaphor, not limited to written words and possibly taking the form of “writing by the voice,” a harmonic *écriture féminine* metaphorized as writing in mother’s milk or the uterus (*Illa* 208, *Newly*). Although her metaphors here are maternal, biologically the province of women, according to Cixous neither biological women nor men need be condemned to the space of phallogentrism. Cixous understood feminine writing as a bisexual political act that holds open “the very possibility of change” (“Laugh” 249). Whether the emphasis is on alternative writing or subversive rewriting, what is at stake in this feminist attention to language is the relationship between the twin materialities of writing and the body. This is perhaps most obvious in Cixous’s work, which specifically stresses the importance of the connection. Cixous exhorted women to write themselves and make their bodies heard in order to make “the huge resources of the unconscious” burst forth (*Newly* 94-

97). She defied and challenged the traditional phallogocentric norm. Cixous constantly emphasized the role of the body in the creation of a text. She opined that repressed sexual desires can be a source of creativity and that since women are taught in patriarchal cultures to deny their libidinal desires, they are also thwarted from becoming creative artists. Cixous stated that the woman who internalizes phallogocentric criticisms begins to accuse herself of being a monster. Cixous's insights into the effects of phallogocentric dominance of literature and aesthetic value mirror Gilbert and Gubar's findings in "Infection in the Sentence". According to them, the patriarchal control of literature has profoundly crippled the female psyche. Their thesis expands upon and revises the Bloomian notion of "anxiety of influence," and they argued that "in comparison to the 'male' tradition of strong, father-son combat, however, this female anxiety of authorship is profoundly debilitating" (293). They explained that the highly creative woman suffers from mental diseases or "dis-eases": agoraphobia, anorexia, claustrophobia (295). To Cixous a woman's artistry is in itself nonconformity, a monstrosity against phallogocentrism. Cixous argued that feminine language "will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetoric, regulations and codes." (315) She boldly stated that feminine language promises revolution on two levels. Extrinsicly it triggers social and political changes. Intrinsicly it undermines phallogocentric expectations and demands concerning syntax, grammar, linear thought, Aristotelian unity and narrative teleology.

---

### 3.6.2 Irigaray :

---

In a rather different move, Luce Irigaray also turned to the female body in order to develop an account of woman's pleasure that does not privilege sight. Irigaray argued that all accounts of bodily pleasure have traditionally been dominated by the scopophilic drive of male pleasure described by psychoanalysis. Deemphasizing the role played by visual pleasure, which is by definition primarily patriarchal, Irigaray went so far as to argue that "woman takes more pleasure from touching than from looking" (*This Sex* 26). Woman's pleasure, she said, for which the language of psychoanalysis is inadequate, is fluid, tactile, and what is most important, plural. It must be noted that Irigaray's use of anatomical analogies to describe feminine pleasure (and thus to reinterpret the phallogocentric discourse of philosophy and psychoanalysis) leaves her open to charges of essentialism. Yet it is also



possible to think of her work as turning to biological metaphor's and images of woman already prevalent in Western discourse in order to produce a new discourse that does not *see* sexual difference as a question of pure anatomical difference.

According to Irigaray, women cannot simply step outside of phallogocentrism so suddenly so as to think and write in ways completely free of the rules of patriarchy, for language and discourse are themselves inscribed with those rules. Instead, women have to work like a virus from within patriarchal discourses to infect and radically change them, thus "leaving open the possibility of a different language" (*This Sex* 80). Not surprisingly, then, the discourses of philosophy and psychoanalysis become prime "hosts" for Irigaray's work. She explained, "Unless we limit ourselves naively—or perhaps strategically—to some kind of limited or marginal issues, it is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and *disrupt* in as much as this discourse sets forth the law for all others, in as much as it constitutes the discourse on discourse" (74). In posing this challenge, Irigaray hoped to expose the ways in which patriarchal discourses are politically determined and disrupt altogether the power structures they hold in place. With this goal in mind, Irigaray sought to disrupt the discourses of Sigmund Freud and Plato (*Speculum of the Other Woman*), Jacques Lacan and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (*This Sex Which Is Not One*), Martin Heidegger (*L'Oubli*), Friedrich Nietzsche (*Amante Marine*), and Baruch Spinoza and Emmanuel Levinas (*Ethique*), to name only a few.

Similar political interventions have been made by Catherine Clement both in her study of opera (*Opera, or the Undoing of Woman*) and in her consideration of the sorceress and the hysteric (*The Newly Born Woman*); by Michele Le Doeuff in her interrogation of the role of lack and the place of knowledge acquisition in Western philosophy (*L'Imaginaire philosophique*); by Barbara Johnson in her readings of literature and Deconstruction (*The Critical Difference* and *A World of Difference*); by Julia Kristeva in her numerous works on linguistics, psychoanalysis and literature (*Revolution in Poetic Language*, *De-sire in Language*, *Powers of Horror*, *Tales of Love* and *Black Sun*); and by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her analyses of the relationship between philosophy, Marxism, deconstruction and subaltern studies (*In Other Worlds*).

---

### 6.6.3 Kristeva :

---

Julia Kristeva, like Woolf, saw women writers caught between the father and the mother. As writers they collude with phallic dominance, associated with the privileged father-daughter relationship on the one hand, and on the other they simultaneously flee everything phallic to find refuge in the valorisation of a silent underwater body, thus abdicating any entry into history. Kristeva's works have taken as their central concept a polarity between 'closed' rational systems and 'open' and disruptive irrational systems. She viewed poetry as poised between these two types of system. Julia Kristeva's main interest was in discourse which confronts language and thinks it against itself. She focused on the signifying process, trying to answer not only the question of exactly how language means but also what is in language that resists intelligibility and signification. She argued that structuralism, which focuses on the static phase of language and attempts to fix it and describe its details, sees it as homogeneous. Semiotics, on the other hand, which studies language as discourse articulated by a speaking subject, sees it as fundamentally heterogeneous. Kristeva gave a complex psychological account of the relationship between the normal and the poetic. She viewed human beings as a space across which physical and psychic impulses flow. The indefinite flux of impulses is regulated by family and social constraints. In the earliest pre-Oedipal stage, the flow of impulses is centred around the mother which leads to a disorganised prelinguistic flux of movements, gestures, sounds and rhythms. She called this 'semiotic' as it is an unorganised signifying process, active beneath the linguistic performance of an adult. Gradually this semiotic process gets regulated and gives way to logic and coherent syntax and rationality of the adult and this Kristeva called the 'symbolic'. For women, then, access to the symbolic order is through the father, entrapping women in THE classic double bind: if a woman identifies with the mother, she ensures her exclusion from and marginality in relation to the patriarchal order. If, on the other hand she identifies with the father—makes herself in his image, then she ends up becoming "him" and supporting , the same patriarchal order which excludes and marginalizes her as a woman. Kristeva argued that women must refuse to accept this dilemma. If, as she argued, the Judeo-Christian culture represents woman as the unconscious of the symbolic order—basic instinctual, drive-related "jouissance," then, from her very marginal position she can disrupt the symbolic chain. So, women must not refuse to enter the symbolic order, but neither should they adopt the masculine model of femininity. They must, in fact, uphold the Law and sexual difference within

the patrilinear frame and refuse to become one of “them.” It would be interesting to add that this balancing act turned out to be much too costly for some women for whom madness and suicide became the only routes (Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Maria Tsvetaeva to name a few). She spoke of Carnavalesque language that broke through the laws of language censored by grammar, semantics and their attempt to manage the voice of the other ; at the same time it was a social protest which came into being in the margins of the dominant culture, but from that position it was powerful enough to begin to generate social change. She said that the *avant-garde* poet, man or woman, enters the Body of the Mother and resists the Name of the Father. In literature, thus, the semiotic meets the symbolic. This liberating energy, *this jouissance*, enacts a rapture which is close to rupture which points at anarchy. This poetic revolution, she linked with a political feminist revolution and foresaw this anarchism destroy the dominance of phallogocentrism.

---

#### 6.4.4 Witting and Butler :

---

Some poststructuralist feminists, however, have preferred to develop an alternative to patriarchal discourse in place of the strategy of subversive rewriting. Monique Wittig attempted to create completely new, nonphallogocentric discourses in her fictional works *Les Guerilleres* (1969, trans. David LeVay, 1971), *L’Opoanax* (1969, *The Opoanax*, trans. H. Weaver, 1976), and *Le Corps lesbien* (1973, *The Lesbian Body*, trans. David LeVay, 1975). As a counter to the heterosexual, patriarchal social contract, Wittig proposed a structural change in language that will destroy the categories of gender and sex. Frequently this change she said would take the form of experimentation with pronouns and nouns, which she called the “lesbianisation” of language. (“One Is Not” 53).

While poststructuralist feminists have brought us a long way, the most complex and, one must add, the most delightful analysis of the distinction between gender and sex belongs to Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (1999) she contends that “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature” (7). Rather, gender as a discursive element gives rise to a belief in a prediscursive, natural sex. That is to say, sex is retrospectively produced through our understanding of gender, so that in a sense gender

comes before sex (7). Butler argues that in light of this counterintuitive situation, we should deconstruct the “gender fables [that] establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts” and recognize that “it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (xiii, 3). The status of gender for Butler becomes a free-floating artifice, as it emerges radically independent of sex. States Judith Butler : “Taken to its logical limit, the sex/ gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies.... *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.” (10) Gender she says is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. Gender thus proves to be “performative”. That is to say, “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (25).