

Stephen Greenblatt's "Resonance and Wonder": Theory, Interpretation, and Its Relevance to Joyce's "The Dead."

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Abstract

New Historicism is one of the most important literary theories that appear in the postmodernist epoch between 1970 and 1990. It aims at understanding the literary work within its historical context with concentration on the literary history, cultural history and history of concepts. As such, it becomes associated with the development of the concept of history and culture. The New Historicism aims at interpreting the literary text throughout: examining the 'coopted' or hidden cultural trends, criticizing the authoritative political institutions, and subverting the pervasive thoughts. The paper aims at explaining Greenblatt's article shedding lights on the main principles of New Historicism as a literary approach. Then the paper will make use of New Historicism to interpret James Joyce's *The Dead*.

Key words: New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt's "Resonance and Wonder", James Joyce, *The Dead*, history and culture.

Aspects of New Historicism in Stephen Greenblatt's "Resonance and Wonder" with a Critical Application to James Joyce's *The Dead*

New Historicism is one of the most important literary theories that appear in the postmodernist epoch between 1970 and 1990. It aims at understanding the literary work within its historical context with concentration on the literary history, cultural history and history of concepts. As such, it becomes associated with the development of the concept of history and culture. The New Historicism aims at interpreting the literary text throughout: examining the 'coopted' or hidden cultural trends, criticizing the authoritative political institutions, and subverting the pervasive thoughts.

The paper aims at summarizing Greenblatt's article shedding lights on the main principles of New Historicism as a literary approach. Then the paper will make use of the approach to interpret James Joyce's *The Dead*.

Stephen Greenblatt is a literary critic, theorist and scholar. He was born in 1943. He coins the term New Historicism, in 1982, for the literary approach he follows to analyses Renaissance texts, but "he used the term rather inadvertently and would prefer 'cultural poetics' to New Historicism"(Kar 76). His article, "Resonance and Wonder",

discusses the understanding of an object of art, whether it is an artifice in a museum or a literary work, according to new historicists approach. Greenblatt draws three main points to distinguish New Historicism from Historicism.

The first: historicism believes that history is in progress and human being can do nothing to stop that process, depriving, as such, man's agency from creating history. It presupposes that man and women "mysteriously alienated from all of those who enact them". Unlike historicism, New Historicism insists on the agency of man, women, and even the marginalized groups in a given culture, because the indecisiveness or a highly peripheral position can be inferred as expressive and thus taken to indicate deliberate intent (Greenblatt 308).

New Historicism avoids using the term "man" which gives a collective meaning to the public. The interest of New Historicism is not "in the abstract universal but in particular, contingent cases, the selves fashioned and acting according to the generative rules and conflicts of a given culture". As an example of the agency that may be implied or co-opted within the literary work, Greenblatt analyses a scene in Shakespeare's play *Midsummer Night Dream*. That scene mocks and subverts a Catholic ritual of blessing the newlywed with holy water, in favour of the English Protestant authority at the Elizabethan age. The protestant authority used to associate catholic rituals with 'pagans'. Shakespeare make use of that association in a scene in the play in which the Fairy King Oberon and other fairies are going to bless the wedding beds of newlywed fairies with 'field dew'. As such, Shakespeare transforms the Catholic ritual into theatrical representation: The transportation simultaneously mocks, celebrates, denaturalizes, and normalizes the ritual. It denaturalizes the ritual by removing it from human agents and attributing it to fairies. It mocks Catholic practice by linking it to infamous superstitions and then performing it on stage, where it is exposed as a theatrical illusion. It normalizes the ritual by turning the specially sanctified water into ordinary dew; and it celebrates the practice by reinstating it with the charismatic magic of the theatre (Greenblatt 308).

The second assumption of historicism is that historians should refrain from making value judgments when examining past eras or earlier cultures (Greenblatt 310). The New Historians, on the other hand, believe that writing history is a process of interplaying the past with the present, engaging, analysing; judging, otherwise it would be worthless (311). Trying not to make judgments is in itself a subjective position because it supports the authority either, the political or the academic. Greenblatt presupposes the possibility of making connection between the past and the present by "analogy or causality; that is, a particular set of historical circumstances could be represented in such a way as to bring out homologies with aspects of the present" that the present condition can be inferred as the results of past events (Greenblatt 310).

The third characteristic of the historicism is their adoration of the conventional modes. In other words, and here he talks about literature and art, they assume that every piece of art or every detail in a literary work is done for an artistic and unique purpose. In other word, unreplaceable. For instance: " every tedious bit of clowning in Doctor Faustus was richly significant. Behind these exercises was the assumption that great

works of art were triumphs of resolution, that they were, in Bakhtin's term, monological the mature expression of a single artistic intention. (Greenblatt 312)

On the other hand, The New Historicist aims at making an objective approach away from the formalists and historicists who imagine high culture as a unified construction free from conflict grounded in aesthetic effort that rises above particular economic or political factors. What this perspective overlooks, however, is the presence of psychic, social, and material resistance—an irreducible otherness that preserves a sense of separation and difference. The New Historicists claim that they stand at the same distance from the 'margins' as well as the 'center' of a literary work. This tendency of examining the cultural history, history of ideas, history of marginalized groups make some critics think that the New Historicism approach is asymmetrical. According to Walter Cohen, New Historicists tend to be interested in obscure and unconventional resources like "dreams, popular or aristocratic festivals, denunciations of witchcraft, sexual treatises, diaries and autobiographies, descriptions of clothing, reports on disease, birth and death records, accounts of insanity" (qtd in Greenblatt 312).

What make the New historicists' interest in these cultural materials are for their powerful complex and expressive representation of the ideological and cultural environment that created them (Greenblatt 312). The exploration of these fields would help to understand the literary text. That complexity of cultural materials have their 'resonance' in the literary text. By "resonance," Greenblatt refers to the probability and capacity of the literary work to interplay with the consciousness of the readers or audiences to conjure the social and historical context from which the literary work has been produced. In this sense, the work can function metaphorically—or more directly, as a kind of metonym—allowing viewers to perceive and reflect on the larger world that shaped it (Greenblatt 313).

Thus according to Greenblatt the resonance of the text can be found in both "the complex context of its formation and its subsequent transmissions" (Kar 76). Louis Montrose, elaborates that the aim is to understand the historical context of the literary work and the process of remoulding history turning it into a literary text (Greenblatt 313). Thus, there is an intertextual or 'dialogic' (Kar 76) relationship between the literary text and its history that constitutes its context. For as much as the cultural and historical materials are tools to interpret the literary text, the literary text itself may be as well a mean to understand the epoch in which it has been created.

Greenblatt explain the mission of the New Historicist critic is to retrieve the historical context of literary work and to inspect the affinities and dissimilarities between that historical context and the present. The critic should not approach those intersecting circumstances as a fixed or established backdrop for literary analysis, but as a complex, shifting network of social forces, often marked by tension and contradiction. The aim is not to anchor interpretation to some external, undeniable foundation, but to situate the literary work in relation to other representational practices active within its culture at a particular historical moment and as they resonate with our own (Greenblatt 313).

While historicism considers the literary text homogeneous and organic, the New

Historicism believe that it can be deconstructed; not homogeneous; and controlled by epistemological groups. New Historicism thinks that history does not move smoothly in a subsequent track rather it has its leaps and gaps, i. e. history is not constituted of consistent truths that can be used to interpret literature. The literary text is rather a part of a historical context interacts with other cultural components of institutions, beliefs, and balance of powers. As Greenblatt remarks in his essay "Towards a Poetics of Culture" a work of art is "the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society" (qtd. in Kar 82).

Both of Michel Foucault and Greenblatt believe that the power of the author resulted from various institutional forces that divide the author's role into a complex web of authority. Greenblatt gives an example about this point when he talks about a very popular travel book in England in the Medieval Ages whose author appears to be not existed, "The seventeenth-century writer Sir Thomas Browne declared that Sir John Mandeville was "the greatest liar of all time." (http://hoaxes.org/archive/permalink/the_travels_of_sir_john_mandeville). The book narrates events that supposed to be true about an English knight who make travels to Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Persia, and Turkey. While the geographical accounts are very precise, the narration dehumanizes the people of these regions:

...had the bodies of humans but the heads of dogs, of a tribe whose only source of nourishment was the smell of apples, of a people the size of pygmies whose mouths were so small that they had to suck all their food through reeds, and of a race of one-eyed giants who ate only raw fish and raw meat.

http://hoaxes.org/archive/permalink/the_travels_of_sir_john_mandeville).

Thus, the text here is made by the political forces to serve imperialistic ends at the onset of European colonialism because most likely people of the medieval ages in Europe might find these stories truthful and unquestionable. By employing such a striking argument, Greenblatt uncover the intricate relationship between the institutions of the system and the author who serves their ends. From a new historical perspective, the author—like the text—is not a fixed source of meaning, but rather is constantly being shaped, repositioned, and appropriated within shifting power structures (Kar 82).

Greenblatt makes use of the example of *Mandeville's Travels*, *Friar Jordanus' Marvels of the East*, and *Marco Polo's Book of Marvels*, to talk about the textual capability of texts that have marvellous elements to rise wonder. He defines wonder as "the power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention". While this power is usually demonstrated in the museums throughout tangible objects, Greenblatt states that texts also can evoke 'wonder'. Greenblatt concludes his article saying that there is discursive relationship between resonance and wonder. As far as the museums are capable of arising wonder throughout their displayed objects, resonance is then guaranteed.

Applying New Historicism approach on the literary texts proves it success in interpreting a subtle text as *The Dead* 1907 of James Joyce. It is the last story in the collection of *The Dubliners*, which is not published until 1914 because some publishers find that some stories are disrespectful. In a letter, George Moore¹ concludes his opinion about the collection stating that some of the stories are unimportant and offensive, however the collection as a whole is a work of smart man and the "The Dead" is almost flawless (Joyce and Pound 80). Therefore, it is the most artistic piece in the collection according to Moore and it is the last piece in the collection.

There are autobiographical evidences, found in Richard Ellmann book *James Joyce* 1959, verify that some events and characters in the story have their parallels in Joyce's life. According Ellmann, Nora Barnacle, the lasting friend and the woman whom Joyce married, had had a relationship with a man named Michael. She decided to leave him and move from Galway to Dublin: "This real-life Michael left his bed to ¹ George Augustus Moore (1852-1933), Irish novelist, poet, and playwright, born in county Mayo. While studying art in Paris, he wrote two volumes of verse, *Flowers of Passion* (1878) and *Pagan Poems* (1882). In "George Augustus Moore." Microsoft® Student 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008. visit Nora on a rainy night before she left for Dublin. Later, while she was in Dublin, she learned of his death." Richard Ellmann further observes parallels between life and fiction: Gabriel in "The Dead" reflects aspects of Joyce himself, just as Gretta represents Nora. In fact, many of the story's characters appear to be drawn from real individuals in Joyce's life, suggesting that the narrative is deeply rooted in personal and biographical experience.

There is an evidence, which may clarify the reason behind writing the story, found in a letter Joyce has written to his brother, Stanislaus, on September 25, 1906. He seems not be satisfied with the image he has presented for Dublin in the *Dubliners*, and that letter is sent before he writes "The Dead": "I have not reproduced its ingenious insularity and its hospitality, the latter 'virtue' so long as I can see does not exist elsewhere in Europe" (Mahaffey 27).

The historical information provided enriches the text's readings. Some critics reads these information within the stylistic mood of Joyce's writing concluding that he in fact criticizes the society of *Dubliners* in this story even harder than other stories in the collection. What makes their reading sensible is the phrase "ingenious insularity and its hospitality" in Joyce's letter.

The party offers sensual pleasure of food, music, and dancing, and yet it also accommodates grimmer realizations about coldness, injustice, and mortality. He does not offer meaning directly, through a discursive presentation, but he has created conditions in which visitations of fresh understanding, like visitations of chance or grace might happen (Mahaffey 26)

Other critics reads the text within the literary history of that period - the beginning of the twentieth century- and finds out that it is typically an imagist text. Joyce precedes the

imagism movement, which appears as a movement five years late, states Ezra Pound. Yet that does not refute that Joyce has been influenced by Pound. The basic trait of imagism is its representation of the text as it is without much interference of the writer.

According to Tim Akers Joyce directly portrays Gabriel's inner thoughts and the external events of the narrative. Ezra Pound, in his review of *Dubliner*, praised this narrative technique, remarking that Joyce's strength lies in his refusal to burden the reader with unnecessary details. Pound notes that Joyce introduces his characters with speed and clarity, avoids sentimentalizing them, and refrains from overly elaborate or tangled narration (Akers 91). In other words, Joyce's style is marked by restraint, precision, and a focus on presenting characters and actions as they are, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions.

To sum up, it is evident that the New Historicism goes beyond Formalism and aestheticism looking for implied cultural contexts and connect the texts with its social, political, literary, and ideological environment. In other words, the literary products and speeches are associated with its epoch, express its prevail ideologies, and reflect the overall social, class, and ideological conflicts of the everyday reality the author lives in. Thus, New Historicism has multiple specialties that make use of Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Louis Althusser. It has strong relationship with cultural criticism, deconstructionism, and cultural materialism. What is considered as weak points in the New Historicism, is its neglecting of the artistic and aesthetic aspects of the literary text, however Greenblatt asserts that the aesthetic aspects arises 'wonder' which leads to scrutinize the text's cultural, and historical context.

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