The Multi-genre Project
New Historical/Cultural Criticism Summary


Presuppositions about THE TEXT:

1. "...the literary text, through its representation of human experience at a given time and place, is an interpretation of history." The literary text reflects the discourses circulating at the time the text was written. "The literary text shaped and was shaped by discourses circulating in the culture in which it was produced" (292).

2. The text is the result of "the various ways in which [the writers] interpreted their experiences" (292).

3. "...literary texts are cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written...the literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text (the literary work) and the context (the historical conditions that produced it) are mutually constitutive: they create each other. Like the dynamic interplay between individual identity and society, literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts" (288-289).

4. "For cultural critics, a literary text, or any other kind of cultural production, performs cultural work to the extent to which it shapes the cultural experience of those who encounter it, that is, to the extent to which it shapes our experience as members of a cultural group" (295).

5. Cultural criticism has one major difference from New Historicism and that is Cultural Criticism is more overtly political than New Historicism. Cultural Criticism draws from feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, lesbian/gay/queer criticism, and postcolonial/African-American criticism (293).

Some goals for THE READER:

1. "...new historicism tries to promote the development of and gain attention for the histories of marginalized peoples" (284).

2. A reader can't avoid a subjective perspective. "... the inevitability of personal bias makes it imperative that new historicists be as aware of and as forthright as possible about their own psychological and ideological positions relative to the material they analyze so that their readers can have some idea of the human 'lens' through which they are viewing the historical issues at hand. This practice is called *self positioning*" (286).
3. "Our goal is to use new historicism and cultural criticism to help enrich our reading of literature by helping us see how literary texts participate in the circulation of discourses, shaping and shaped by the culture in which they emerge and by the cultures in which they are interpreted; by helping us see the ways in which the circulation of discourses is the circulation of political/social/intellectual/economic power; and by helping us see the ways in which our own cultural positioning influences our interpretations of literary and non-literary texts" (298).

Directions for THE RESEARCH:

1. Historical documents written near the time the novel was written - Primary sources (283).
2. Historians' interpretations of the time period during which the book was written Secondary sources (283).
3. Literary Critics’ interpretations of the novel.

Implications for THE MULTIPLE GENRES:

1. "From a new historical perspective, no discourse, by itself, can adequately explain the complex cultural dynamics of social power. For there is no monolithic (single, unified, universal) spirit of an age, and there is no adequate totalizing explanation of history (an explanation that provides a single key to all aspects of a given culture). There is, instead, a dynamic unstable interplay among discourses: they are always in a state of flux, overlapping and competing with one another (or, to use new historical terminology, negotiating exchanges of power) in any number of ways at any given point in time” (281).

2. We can't analyze a discourse or multiple discourses in isolation. The Multigenre project seeks to represent multiple discourses and the negotiation of power in order to reflect a more dynamic view of a time and/or a novel.

3. "...new historicism is concerned not with historical events as events, but with the ways in which events are interpreted, with historical discourses, with ways of seeing the world and modes of meaning" (292).

4. Oppressed people have power and create power (294).

5. "...culture is a process, not a product; it is a lived experience, not a fixed definition" (294).

6. Cultural Criticism "asks us to make connections between the literary text, the culture in