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New- Historicism and Sherlock Holmes

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Abstract

This paper seeks to attempt a neo-historical approach in reading Sherlock Holmes. The paper tries to do a parallel reading of the text based on socio-cultural and historical conditions so that the reader can get an idea under what circumstances the author wrote those fiction. While attempting a neo-historicist approach, the race and gender question also come into context.

Keywords: New-historicism, race, gender, parallel reading, fiction

Neo-Historicism is a critical approach developed in the 1980s in the writings of Stephen Greenblatt. New Historicism is characterised by a parallel reading of a text with its socio-cultural and historical conditions, which form the co-text. New Historians rejected the fundamental tenets of New Criticism (That the text is an autotelic artefact), and Liberal Humanism (That the text has timeless significance and universal value). On the contrary, New Historicism, as Louis Montrose suggested, deals with the “Textuality of history and the historicity of texts.” Textuality of history refers to the idea that history is constructed and fictionalised, and the historicity of text refers to its inevitable embedment within the socio-political conditions of its production and interpretation. Although it rejects many of the assumptions of post-structuralism, New Historicism is in a way poststructuralist in that it rejects the essential idea of a common human nature that is shared by the author, characters and readers; instead it believes that identity is plural and hybrid. The only way history can be assessed is by the literary works of the past. Critics need to adopt new methods to read the historical texts critically. Thus, it gives birth to new Schools of thought from time to time. The word “New Historicism” started being labelled to various critical works only after Stephen Greenblatt’s works. Greenblatt is often credited for coining the word “New Historicism” (Hamilton 131). The purpose behind coining this term was to adopt new critical methods for analysing historical texts. New Historicism is a literary theory that proposes an analysis of a literary text from the context of both the critic and the author of the texts. It is vital to take into consideration the culture prevailing at the time when a literary piece was written (Shahbaz Afzal Bezar *et al.* 59). The way the author was brought up, his society, the books and other sources of information that were available to the author should be analysed and studied very critically before his works are studied. Valente states that New Historicism also acknowledges the theory that the manner in which a critic analyses a piece of writing is also influenced by the critic’s environment (Valente 28). The rules of the society for men and women, economic condition of the country, political environment in the country all play a vital role in shaping the author’s mind and hence author’s literary works. This is the reason Greenblatt advised critics to abandon any kind of value judgment while critically analysing a historical piece of work (Balkaya 7073). The presence of value judgment will make the critical analysis biased and contaminated. The new historicists propose that the historical knowledge at their disposal, past critical works, are full of biases.

Neo Historicism uses the idea of thick Description from anthropology to describe a literary piece. It provides social, economic and political contexts to a piece of writing. Dr Watson is shown as a war veteran who served the British Empire in Afghanistan and India. By the neo-historicism theory, the social background of Great Britain is the most patriarchal even though a woman was in charge of all decision-making. These are the double standards that can be cultivated from the story of *A Study in Scarlet*. Neo-historicism argues that Victorian

literature often presents the chronic invalidism of any character as the central theme of the novel or story (Hingston 12). Neo-historicism also targets the contextual structure of the stories that are being personified by the author but represent the ambiguous part of the society and its behavior towards a particular race or gender. Neo Historicism also deals with analysis of representation of the society in the form of fictional stories. The Victorian era represented in stories of Holmes canon are accurate depictions of the time. The representation of women as victims or helpless, absence of any leading women characters in the stories depicts the status of women in the society. The political scenario existing at the time between Great Britain and France must have encouraged Doyle to use the ongoing political situation to be used in “The Adventure of the Naval Treaty”. The author used the political setting as the backdrop of the story.

It is important to note that by the time *A Study in Scarlet* was published, there was a gradual shift towards right wing government. There was the emergence of New Imperialism. This wave was supported by various professionals such as Doctors, Teachers, Authors and Artists. The way an author supports this movement is by writing in that context. Hence, one can see the stories in the Holmes canon always advocate the Imperial ambitions. New Imperialism demanded suppressing voices rising against nationalism and continued support for British Imperialism in order to unite a nation that was increasingly getting divided into various ideologies. It was evident from the fact that Arthur Conan Doyle always justified England’s participation in wars such as Boer Wars in Africa and always wrote the incidents of the war in a positive light and presented the participation of the British Empire in the wars as a necessary event. He mentioned various historical events that took place in the colonised regions of the Empire such as India, Afghanistan and expressed any form of freedom movement in those regions as acts of terror and rebellion.

The economy plays an important role in building any nation. The prevailing economic condition in any country influences the manner in which the author writes. Neo-historicism investigates the possibilities of how all the factors of the Victorian era contributed to the stories written by Doyle. Financial tensions and the class division form an integral and important part of stories written by Doyle. The thief in “The Adventure of the Red Headed League” steals French currency and uses it to stir criminal activities in England. The reason this story is essential is because of the economic background that has been shown in the story. The class differentiation between a pawnbroker, a thief, and a reputed bank personal is vividly exposed in the story.

There are many instances where Dr Watson refers to his stay in India as miserable. This may be disrespectful to the people living in India and may entitle them to criticize Doyle for representing India in such a way. It is criticized more severely today because the rules of what is acceptable and what is not in literary context has changed a lot from the Victorian era. If we consider a Neo Historicism approach, one can see that Doyle would have conversed with British officers who were stationed in India and would have listened to their complaints arising out of the hot weather conditions in India and the difference in facilities available in India as compared to their usual life in England. The author's portrayal of colonies through Dr Watson and other characters is merely the portrayal of the hardships faced by

visitors staying in the colonies. England, and in general, the countries in the West were far more developed in the medical and scientific field as compared to India and countries in the East. This is another reason, the English officers stationed in India might have despised their stay in India. Although New Historicists claim that their analysis is generally free of any kind of bias, it is still an arguable point for discussion. World has seen a lot of revolutions, power struggles and changes since the times these stories were written. Simply analysing these stories in the present context would lead to contextual blindness. Neo Historicism is the key that would help a critic to understand under what circumstances an author wrote his stories. The theory insists on looking beyond the literature and digging deep into the social, political, and economic contexts of the stories. The theory also embraces the idea that understanding great literature like Holmes can be modified through time.

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