

ISSN 0976-8165

# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

August 2015 Vol. 6, Issue-4



6th Year of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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## The Idea of History as Literary Narrative in Hayden White's Theory: A Critical Exploration of "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact"

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### Abstract:

The studies in Literature have widened its arena and interdisciplinary approaches have become routine nowadays. Incorporating psychology, sociology, history, philosophy into the study of Literature is very common. Just as History is one of the tools in interpreting literature, similarly literary processes are involved in creating History. This paper seeks to study how Hayden White in his essay, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" establishes his arguments and proves History to be constructed of the narrative strategies utilized universally in creating any piece of literary fiction. His overall theory attaches History to be functioning along the parameters of literary creation. This paper seeks to study, analyze and surface how Hayden White with his vociferous theorizing power successfully institutionalizes history to be containing fictitious elements and how the past events are actually processed with the touch of imagination to compose historical discourses.

### Keywords: Historical Discourse, Literariness, Em-plot-ment, Tropes

Hayden White is a well-known figure in the studies of History and the related fields. He has made some genuine contribution to the theories in the field of history and its making.. He used literature to explain history when others were trying to make sense of literature via history. He has contributed exhaustively to enhance the understanding of history as a discipline. The two overwhelming contribution that sensitized the creation of historical artifacts are *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination of Nineteenth Century Europe* and *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. These have brought about a kind of revolution His *Metahistory* is an astounding work describing the "literariness of history". He owes profoundly to Northrop Frye for justifying the "deep structures" of history and establishing the relation of history with respect to both literature and culture. He exhorts that historical models cannot take recourse in science; rather they deftly make use of narratives and their underlying techniques for organization and presentation of the raw past.

White takes on the tools of a literary critic to interpret historical documents. His narrative theory is highly beneficial for the students of literature who try to grasp the meaning of history as a process of creation. He strengthens the whole argument by dubbing history as "verbal fictions".

Post *Metahistory* period brought him somewhere between the roads of history and literature, responsible to both at the same time. He is one of the leading figures of the revolutionary movement in the field of history known as "new cultural history"; the others being Lynn Hunt, Thomas Lacquer and France Roger Chartier. As a part of this movement all these

people turned to literature to analyze the complex techniques of history. The essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” reinforces the idea pinpointed in White’s book *Metahistory*. Defining the term Metahistory he says that metahistory is the process of getting behind surface of history to enquire about the nuances of any historical detail. It tries to get back to the structures which function in the making of history:

One must try to get behind or beneath the presuppositions which sustain a given type of enquiry and ask the questions that can be begged in its practice in the interest of determining why this type of inquiry has been designed to solve the problems it characteristically tries to solve. This is what metahistory seeks to do. It addresses itself to questions such as, what is the structure of a peculiarly *historical* consciousness? (White 1712)

White thereby tries to project that it is the structures and the composition of historical work that must be analyzed to decode the fictitious elements in a historical document. To consolidate this very assertion, he makes the point that the same language structures which make up a literary text, goes into the making of a historical text. Therefore, only the structures can verify the inapproachability of History. Very aptly White suggests that since a historian makes use of the language to represent the past as history, historical document can be placed adjacent and in alignment to a literary piece on account of the inherent fictionality that it involves.

White argues in opposition to the point that history possesses a realistic entity purged entirely of literariness of any kind. He advocates that even history makes use of language and thus fictionality is bound to emerge and come to fore, camouflaging the purely historical fact. The contexts of history are manufactured too like that of the contexts of the literary texts are prefabricated. He presents Erich Auerbach’s point with a twist and maintains that on account of its so called representation of reality, history can be made use of to study the “narratives of realism” (1710) rather

According to White, histories take birth through the process known as “emplotment” of the facts and figures available at disposal. By emplotment he meant the ways by which plots are attributed to a particular past event. It can be summarized as putting facts into stories:

And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures, in precisely the way Frye has suggested is the case with “fictions” in general. (1714)

When original accounts are put across as history they are fabricated and built up. The historians construct tales out of the stocks of actualities. To make substance out of the past records, which are otherwise bitty and broken, the historian employs the power of imagination, like any other literary writer does. The exact way the scripting has to be done lies inside the minds of historian who frames it. It then is called as historian’s “narrative point of view” (1710) that is accountable to produce history as it appears. This act of creating histories makes history - the sibling of literature.

White vehemently says that the events of the past act as raw story elements. These elements like literature are processed into imaginative accounts by writer’s view point. The historian supplies characters, introduces themes and motifs, implements variations of tone, and

thus renders fact to become fiction. The historical events are never dreadful. It's the point of view that makes it look tragic or comic or something else. This labels historical events as disinterested. And it is solely the mindset of a historian that renders it the way he wants to present events in whichever story form he likes. At the same time White makes note of the vital point that the facts must be organized in an order while carving them into a story line. He writes:

The "overall coherence" of historical facts is the coherence of a story, but this coherence is achieved only by tailoring of the "facts" to the requirement of the story form. (1721)

White in his theory has talked about four possible plots that history can conceivably be presented into. Deriving from Frye, he dubs that history could be plotted as tragic, comedy, romantic or ironic. Now what factually concerns the historian the most is the type of set-up which he could use to metamorphose the original threads into stories. The question becomes which way the events must be plotted? Must it be plotted in a tragic way, or in a comic one? Or should it be 'emplotted' as ironic or simply as romantic? If we take an example from the history of Indian freedom struggle movement, and we are to document the events as happened in the life of martyr Bhagat Singh, there are multiple ways in which his life threads could be woven to make it a part of the history. One historian might render it as tragic as his life ended in capital punishment, other historian might interpret it as heroic, while some other historian who takes into account the personal threads of life could possibly dub it as romantic. The point is that the different sequences give different hints to different historians to study and record them differently. White cites the example of French Revolution the manner in which how it was interpreted and registered distinctly by Tocqueville and Michelet.

The important point is that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of those events and endow them with different meanings. (1715)

White thus projects that a particular past event can plausibly be emplotted in a variety of ways. The bigger interrogating focus then becomes how to appropriately match up the sequences of a remote happening with that of the available plot structures. The onus of this crucial deliberation rests on the carefulness and minuteness of the historian. This whole process of tuning in of the past events within the plot frames is nothing but the act of creating fiction. This intentional and thoughtful operation of assigning plots to original accounts is surely one of the ways of culture to derive meaning of both the individual and public pasts. This transforms history into an imagination and thus making it readily accessible. Generally the past events since they are away from us temporally usually appear alienated to us. The codification of the gone events into one of the available plots performs the function of making familiar which otherwise would have remained an estranged phenomenon.

The choice of the plot relies on the cultural bonds that a historian and his audience mutually share. Owing to the sharing of the same cultural contexts the reader reading history is able to deduce the meaning out of a particular event, only because the event is knitted properly into a definable plot background judiciously and meticulously by the historian. Thus a reader is able to compartmentalize a particular historical fact or rather event into tragic, comic, romantic or ironic. Thus historical documents that are available to us are actually the plotted narratives

which are created after due deliberation, taking well note of the cultural constructs. As White puts across:

The historian shares with his audience *general notions of the forms* that significant human situations *must* take by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of sense-making which identify him as a member of one cultural endowment rather than other. (1716)

The plotting of event of the past depends upon the consciousness of the historian. When one narrates, one makes choices. These choices work on the principle of what is given a priority and what is discarded. The choices are liable to determine what is narrated first. This act of making choices, giving preference to one while dispelling off the other is behind the composition of narratives. The choices thus give rise to “verbal artifact”.

White holds that in understanding history, history is defined ever in opposition to what science or literature is not. Science provides laws, while literature banks on possibilities. History stands for what actual is. The concreteness and accessibility of historical milieu is taken into consideration with regard to defining history. The fictive and imaginative capacity of a historian makes up these defining aspects of history. History, just as literature, is understood and appreciated in terms of the classics it has produced, because then the possibilities of negating it gets reduced, and in the similar vein the schemes of science work out.

White leads on further to subscribe history as a collection of intricate symbols. What we get when we read history is not merely the representation of the past events, but what we come across in reality is the mire of symbols which indicates the ways of analyzing and understanding history. They work like extended metaphors, where one thing becomes another. History doesn't portray images but rather “calls to mind” the images of the things it implies. This is exactly how a metaphor works. History is not to be seen as the set of easily decodable signs, but rather as a complex play of symbolic arrangements and extended metaphors.

White proceeds on to the idea of representation of the series of events. He contends that how these events are to be narrated and represented is thoroughly abstract. It is the prerogative of the historian himself how he is to accord the different series within a past event. Indefinite sets of interpretations are possible within a particular event series. These sets are given existence by the creative and the manipulative mind of the historian who contemplates on the events in a series. White writes:

Histories, then, are not only about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure. These sets of relationships are not, however, immanent in the events themselves; they exist only in the mind of the historian reflecting on them. (1724)

White moves on to the point and elaborates upon the kind of language that must go into recording the past historical action. The task of the historian is to acquaint us to what seems strange. White then suggests with the purpose of making strange and alienated appear familiar, the historian must utilize the figurative language and must keep from the technical language. History doesn't have anything in common with technical language, and that “the historian's characteristic instrument of encodation, communication and exchange is ordinary educated

speech.” (1724) This end could only be achieved by the use of figurative language. What is uncanny in the first place can be made decipherable by engaging figurative use of language. White thereby theorizes:

...the kind of emplotment that the historian decides to use to give meaning to a set of historical events is dictated by the dominant figurative mode of the language he has use to *describe* the elements of his account *prior* to his composition of the narrative. (1724)

The plotting of a historical document is guided by the figurative tropes. The four plausible emplotments correspond to four main tropes- metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Trope means when a figurative deviation is capable of becoming an idea in itself assuming an independent existence. Since plotting and use of figurative tropes make up history, then history can be said to conjure up reality rather than reproducing it. As White explicates this thus:

Narrative *style*, in history as well as in the novel, would then be constructed as the modality of the movement from a representation of some original state of affairs to some subsequent state. ...as thus envisaged, narrative would be a process of decodation and recordation in which an original perception is clarified by being cast in figurative mode different from that in which it has come encoded by convention, authority, or custom. (1726)

White puts forward in his theory as a concrete whole is that, he keeps History and Literature on the same platform on the account of the procedure of creation and manipulation involved in its production. To justify his point he has drawn abundantly from the other theorists like Collingwood, Levi-Strauss, and Frye throughout. In the process what he has tried doing is that he expounds and sermonizes over and over again that history carries within itself the sprinklings of fiction and invention. He stresses that the earlier notions of considering history as real and literature as imagined must be done away with it. The actuality that history adheres to should be studied in comparison to and in similitude with what is precisely a product of imagination. As such historical narratives have two mechanisms of occurrence, the “real” and the “revealed”. He maintains that the imagination of the historian in stating different aspects of the past happenings dubs the actual and the real, but which in fact are imagined and deliberated constructions. He impinges that the histories created by the historians and literatures by the creative writers are both same on the level of element of imagination that they both yoke in their creations. He theorizes:

In point of fact, history- the real world as it evolves in time- is made sense of in the same way that the poet or the novelist tries to make sense of it, i.e., by endowing what appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognizable, because it is a familiar form. (1728)

Thus literature becomes history and history becomes literature. He further pinpoints that the element of fictiveness in history is a means to facilitate and expound the facts of the past better just as the fabrication of the literary piece embraces the knowledge of the lived world. This application assists in the identification of the ideological. The acceptance and recognition of the presence of fictional ingredient would only innovate and elevate the teaching of making of history at a self-realized level.

The entire understanding of Hayden White's debate on the historical documenting can be concretized by confidently asserting that history must not be looked at as the construct of facts and certainties but rather history *must* be comprehended as the construct of language. Through his extended discussion on the creation of the history, he has attempted to explain the experience of history to be visualized as a narrative, as a text and as language. He talks about the intrusion of literature in texts by history. He writes:

In the interest of *appearing* scientific and objective, it [history] has repressed and denied to itself its own greatest source of strength and renewal. By drawing historiography back once more to an intimate connection with its literary basis, we should not be putting ourselves on guard against *merely* ideological distortions; we should be by way of arriving at that "theory" of history without which it cannot pass for a "discipline" at all. (1729)

This kind of lookout and approachability that White endorses eases and simplifies the discernment of history and its description. Hayden White with his revolutionizing theory questions the assumptions of history which are purely based on faith and accepted notions. He outright refutes the commonsensical and mundane acceptance of history as being fashioned out of facts singularly. He puts up questions regarding the nature and processes of history, and then he himself substantiates answers which are radical in nature though. He logically and systematically proves and explicates about the interplay of imagination and fictiveness, like the ones found in literature, in historical records and documents. This has unleashed altogether a fresh way of glancing at and taking up studies in histories and historiography with newer perspectives to explore. This applicability has undoubtedly brought in many newer angles of study in both historical and literary fields.

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