

Hayden White's Theory of History as Narrative in the Light of New Historicism

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Abstract: The article aims to shed light on Hayden White's thoughts and notions in terms of the usage of historical narrative. The article touches on White's assumptions that history is like narrative, or history resembles literature and fiction when it comes to the techniques used in constituting it. Hayden White presents several strategies, which he believes that historians use in their writing of historical texts. First, he concentrates on the rhetorical aspect of history writing which is considered a poetic act. This prefigurative act consists of four tropes of figurative language, which are metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Second, Hayden argues, historians use in their texts certain modes such as romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire to determine the type of the texts; these modes are called explanation by formal argument. Third, and lastly, White concentrates on the type of closure of the historical narratives that the historians use, this mode is called explanation by ideological implication where historians show the influence of the period that was imposed on them.

Keywords: Hayden White, History, Narrative, New Historicism, Metahistory

1. Introduction

New historicism as a new literary criticism theory is a reaction against the ideas and principles of old historicism. The main principle of new historicism is to study literary texts with links to their outside contexts. There are significant figures who represented this new criticism, such as Stephen Greenblatt who is considered the founder of this movement's principles, another important figure is Hayden White who is the person in question in this paper. Hayden White sees and looks at history from a different viewpoint, as a historicist who presents controversial and new ideas on the study of history and the process of writing history. Most of his theories concentrate on his assumptions that history is like narrative, or history resembles literature and fiction when it comes to the techniques used in constituting it.

White's theory of narrative history values the imaginative side of historical texts or discourses, and at the same time, this theory assumes that literature is another perspective of reality (White, 1973). For White, literature is a different order of presenting reality. Hayden White starts his theory by presenting several strategies, which he believes that historians use in their writing of historical texts. First, he concentrates on the rhetorical aspect of history writing which is considered a poetic act. This prefigurative act consists of four tropes of figurative language, which are metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Second, Hayden argues, historians use in their texts certain modes such as romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire to determine the type of the texts; these modes are called explanation by formal argument. Third, and lastly, White concentrates on the type of closure of the historical narratives that the historians use, this mode is called explanation by ideological implication where historians show the influence of the period that was imposed on them. Therefore, this paper aims at discussing the theory of historical narrative or so to speak, the history is narrative by Hayden White from his main work, *Metahistory*.

2. NEW HISTORICISM:

New historicism is a critical and post-structuralism method, which was first used by the American critic Stephen Greenblatt. The movement started at the beginning of the 1980s, at that time, Greenblatt edited a selection of Renaissance essays titled " *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*". His work is one of the most important works that made new historicism appear as a new specific critical movement. Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning explains how cultures and texts can interact. It is "used to describe the process of constructing one's identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards" (Greenblatt, 1980). Greenblatt sees that before new historicism, literary texts were analyzed with close reading, formal, and linguistic details. Nevertheless, he adds that the subordinate literary topics should be analyzed instead of the primary ones and the less noticeable ones. Greenblatt asserts on some points, he considers that the creative source of a literary text is not only the author who wrote it. However, he says that literary works can not be separated from the power of their times, and no literary work of art exists without its social energy. Moreover, he states that every literary work is of a purpose and aim, which has to be fulfilled. Greenblatt insists that literary critics should clarify the author's purpose in writing his/her work, and the condition and situation that the work imposes on the author. He also underlines the importance of showing the relationship that the critics should denote between literary texts and cultures.

New historicism seeks to find meaning in the text within the context of the dominating ideas and social assumptions of the historical period in which the text is found. As Bressler (2003) says, new historicists attempt to understand literature from a historical perspective, because they think that, the new criticism could not provide that Moreover, new historicism as a new theory rejected the old historicism, which considered any text as an autonomous entity (182). While new historicism deals with the text as a reality in the period that was produced. Old historicism views history as an accurate account of what has happened, historians can write objectively about any given historical period. New historicism refuses the views and methods of old historicism. According to new historicism, history is subjective, and the writers of history can be affected by their biases and prejudices and as a result, that can affect the interpretation of the past. New historicism argues that history can not provide us with the truth. Wilson and Dutton (1992) suggest that history is formed or written from political reality and that is what makes it true (13).

As stated before, new historicism disagrees with old historicism in terms of looking at history. While old historicism observes history as an autonomous thing, new historicism states that history is a discourse of seeing and considering the world. It also claims that literature has to be read in relation to history, culture, society, and other factors, which aid to determine the meaning of a text. Therefore, new historicists attempt to interpret literature as a cultural product and its text as a cultural product too. New historicism is "based on a parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts usually of the same historical period"(Barry,2009,172). Giles Gunn (1998) suggests New historicism also pays attention to the ideological factors of literary text (37). Therefore, new historicism should analyze the ideologies that the literary texts contain and they have to consider texts in their socio-cultural context. New historicism gives importance to the relationship between society and a literary text. That is why new historicists think that all literary texts are social documents and they reflect the historical environment. A text is not interpreted completely unless it is not related to several discourses, thus, this text is a reflection of the views of the author, customs, society, and social practices.

Therefore, to understand new historicism much more, Muller (2013) determines the main perspectives of its principles. New historicists examine the historical works or texts from historical and cultural conditions of production, meanings, and effects. Texts can be agents and makers of history, History is textual, literature is history, and history is literature. Historians are authors who use literature and literary strategies to tell events. New historicists

contextualize literature within other cultural texts. New Historicism pays attention to the contextualization of literary production and consumption, and to the ideologies that govern these acts as well (3-4).

The final thought about new historicism is the importance of language, Bressler (2005) underlines its significance that language forms the culture and this culture in turn shapes the use of language (133). According to new historicism, language consists of discourses, writings, literature, and other social relations among people who may impose their ideas or acts on others through the use of language. New historicism sees history like literature, as a narrative discourse. History and literature are identical, they are both narrative discourses that react to the historical situations, authors, readers, and culture. Literature is representative of a culture. The new historicist Hayden White supports this idea, and he suggests that our knowledge of the past is determined by particular narrative structures, he says that to talk about the past, we tell stories:

histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that 'liken' the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture. . . . By the very constitution of a set of events in such a way as to make a comprehensible story out of them, the historian charges those events with the symbolic significance of a comprehensible plot structure. (White, 1978, 91-2)

As stated above, White studies and identifies the strategies and tools of critical analysis in the view of new historicism of history and literary texts. He takes into consideration the figures of speech and tropes, critical knowledge of the rhetorical elements of language, and so on. These strategies and tools are proper for a critical study of history and literary studies as well.

3. Hayden White's Theory of History as a Narrative:

Hayden White is an influential figure in the literary movement of new historicism. He is an American history professor, born in July 1928. He is known for his theory of narrative interpretation of history. Most of his ideas and theories are about the study and analysis of works of history by considering the structure of writing history. White's academic works are all in the field of proving his theory of narrative and history. He wrote many important works, but the most distinguished one is '*Metahistory*', which contains most of his considerations of the historical narrative. He also wrote many books to establish the relation between narrative discourse and historical representation. Such as *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural*

Criticism (1978), *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effects* (2000), and *Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and Theory 1957-2007* (2010).

White argues that all historians when they wrote or constituted their works used the same strategies and materials that are employed in writing other literary forms, literature or fiction. For White, history is fiction-like literature, written in the form of narrative discourse. Therefore, White defines the principles and elements that a historical work to be written in the structure of narrative discourse. In *Metahistory*, White defines the historical work as:

A verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them". (White, 1973, 2)

Here, from his definition, White tries to present the essence of his theory of historical narrative. He suggests that narrative is a part of any historical work and vice versa, they are integral because of the way that the data and process of history are represented in the form of narrative. White in his historical narrative gives a great role to language, believing that it can provide any historical work the wanted interpretation. White argues that all historians use several types of strategies to have explanatory effects on the historical works, such as explanations by formal argument, emplotment, ideological implication, and tropology

. Thus, White uses five concepts that distinguish the relation between narrative and historical work. These concepts or elements in his point of view make a historical work a kind of narrative. He looks at the historical works in terms of chronicle, story, mode of emplotment, mode of argument, and mode of ideological implication (White, 1973, 5).

According to Hayden White, as he suggests, all stories are fiction even the stories of history. Therefore, White by studying history starts from the point that constitutes it. White touches on chronicle, story, and plot in the process of writing a historical work. Chronicle is the essential element of any historical account due to its ability to make a basic structure to a historical narrative (Kumar, 2014). For white, a chronicle is an arrangement of events in their temporal order (1973, 5). Chronicles begin and end, yet they have no beginnings and endings, and at the same time, the events in the chronicles can exist as elements of a series, but they are not the elements of a story whose events are more coherent. (Frederick,1992). White argues that historians by commencing to write from a chronicle, which has the potential to become a story, follow the structure of a narrative, White points out:

Then the chronicle is organized into a story by further arrangement of the events into the components of a 'spectacle' or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle, and end. This transformation of chronicle into story is effected by the characterization of some events in the chronicle in terms of inaugural motifs, of others in terms of terminating motifs, and of yet others in terms of transitional motifs. (White 1973, 5)

Therefore, white explains the process in which a historian transforms a chronicle into a story. Stories usually arrange their events in a certain order, which is a beginning, middle, and end. The event in a story is transformed into an inaugurating event according to its occurrence at a certain time and place, and to its importance as well. As White states in his *Metahistory*, "A transitional motif, on the other hand, signals to the reader to hold his expectations about the significance of the events contained in it in abeyance until some terminating motif has been provided..." (1973, 5-6). Stories can provide a traceable way that helps readers understand what took place, in addition, these stories connect events and explain their purpose. What White wants to say is that the chronicle is open-ended having no definite inaugurations and ends and without culmination, yet the story consists of a form with inaugural, transitional, and a terminating motif. (1973, 6). White clarifies; that the death of a king may be a beginning and an end or a transitional event in different stories. Looking at the death in the view of a chronicle, it just represents an element in a series. However, it does not function as a story element. The historian first arranges this event in a chronicle according to its significance along with other events, then the historian represents the coherence of a whole set of events with a beginning, middle, and end. This arrangement of events from a chronicle into a story is the construction of a narrative (6-7).

After discussing the chronicle and the story. and how to transform a chronicle into a story. White points to the work of constructing a plot by a historian or a novelist. For white, historians construct plots by depending on historically unprocessed data and arranged events in the form of a chronicle, while novelists are independent to create and invent their plots to fit their narratives (1973,p.7). Both historians and novelists have to construct plots in their works, and what helps them in constructing are chronicles and stories through arrangements of events in a particular order. White moves from how to form a story out of a chronicle to how meaning is given or provided to historical work. White argues that the use of emplotment by historians helps to bring an explanation of their historical works.

White defines the explanation by emplotment as "Providing the 'meaning' of a story by identifying the kind of story that has been told is called explanation by emplotment" (7). White classifies the story into four different modes of emplotment; romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire. White borrows this classification from Northrop Frye's terminology and classification

of the plot structures in the works of fiction from his work entitled *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Hayden White states when a historian chooses to write his/her plot in the structure of a romance or tragedy or any kind of the four, the historian explains it in one way. "Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind" (ibid, 7). Thus, historians have the complete freedom to choose the mode in which their stories will be written. White sheds the light on the importance of these four plot structures. He says also many stories of the historical works are narratives because they are written in one of these categories. Therefore, there is absolutely a relation between the literary elements and the historical narrative according to White.

White observes romance as, "The Romance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it..." (8). White sets an example from the Holy Grail legends and the story of the resurrection of Christ; as a result, he divides the romance into a secular form and a religious one. White says what is important about romance is how the historical work is constructed and how to bring a particular explanation to the narrative of the historian. White continues to explain tragedy and comedy, for him both of them provide a partial redemption. The tragedy is a representation of the hero's struggle to reach certain reconciliations that existed in social and natural worlds and to show the unchangeable circumstances that men fail to avoid (Kumar,1992). White comments on tragedy: "the reconciliations that occur at the end of Tragedy are much more somber; they are more in the nature of resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world" (9). It represents the forces of conflict between men and the environment and depicts the revelation of the nature of those forces. Tragedy does not provide a kind of reconciliation but gives a kind of consciousness to the spectators of the contest.

As far as comedy, White says, "In Comedy, hope is held out for the temporary triumph of man over his world by the prospect of occasional reconciliations of the forces at play in the social and natural worlds" (9). The reconciliations in comedy may be represented and realized through humorous amusement. This is implicated in white's words "The reconciliations which occur at the end of Comedy are reconciliations of men with men" (9). In the final explanation of emplotment, which is satire, white states that the type of visions of the world is represented in the satire is essentially toned with irony, which in turn is shown through the bleak possibilities, gloomy circumstances, and dark forces that work against the destiny of man. Further, the satire makes reality appear to be exactly the opposite of the romance. White

observes "man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master "Satirical mode of representation signals a conviction that the world has grown old". Satire 'paints its gray on gray' in the awareness of its own inadequacy as an image of reality" (White, 1978, p.10).

Hayden White in his theory of the historical narrative elaborates on another level of conceptualization, which is the explanation by formal argument. According to White, the historians after applying their historical works to a particular plot- structure; resort to the formal argument. White expresses the formal argument:

The important point is that, insofar as a historian offers explanations by which the configurations of events in his narrative are explained in something like a nomological-deductive argument, such explanation must be distinguished from explanatory affect gained by his emplotment of his story as a story of a particular kind. This is not because one might not treat emplotment as a kind of explanation by nomological- deductive means. (1973, 12)

As stated above, the formal argument exists generally with emplotments and aims to establish a persuasive explanation through logical deductions and considering the general principles of the case that the narrative desires to realize. Namely, this argument explains what happens in the story by principles, which work as putative laws of the historical explanation. (White, 11). White suggests that historians use these nomological – deductive arguments to provide explanations for their stories. According to White formal arguments contribute to the explanation of historical narrative because this formal argument takes the meaning from several thoughts of the nature of historical reality and these thoughts are established and formed by some ideal philosophical systems or world views supposed by philosophes. White says that he borrows his formulation of the world view or hypothesis from Stephen C Pepper's *World Hypothesis; A Study in Evidence (1942)*. Pepper defines his hypothesis as " In the most rudimentary common-sense view a hypothesis is identified with a guess or a hunch, and is considered good if it turns out right, bad if it does not" and a world hypothesis is a model of the universe of observations and inferences" (1942,97). Pepper's theory consists of six hypotheses, White takes four of them, which are Formist, Organicist, Mechanistic, and Contextuslist. White thinks that these hypotheses are the principle to establish valid reasons within the historical fields in the process of the emplotments (Kumar, 2014).

Formist as a hypothesis as Pepper suggests (1942) each world view is based on a root metaphor for reality and the root metaphor of it is similarity (151). That is, there is a similarity and analogy between the events of the world. According to White, Formist is:

"The Formist theory of truth aims at the identification of the unique characteristics of objects inhabiting the historical field...When the historian has established the uniqueness of the particular objects in the field or the variety of the types of phenomena which the field manifests, he has provided a Formist explanation of the field as such". (1972, pp.13-14)

White wants to integrate the Formist theory of the world into his theory of the historical narrative to give a kind of explanation. Thus, in order to complete the Formist explanation of the historical field, the practicalities of objects from the historical fields must be identified. The historical explanation rejects the similarities that affirm the objects in the field, so Formism as White asserts is dispersive (Kumar,2014). Formist explanation deals with numerous phenomena but it lacks conceptual precision. Moreover, White elaborates on the theory of organicism of truth, which its main essence is to take the organic development as a root metaphor, and the organicist thinks that each event in the world is a more or less concealed organic process. White says:

The Organicist attempts to depict the particulars discerned in the historical fields as components of synthetic process. At the heart of the Organicist strategy is a metaphysical commitment to the paradigm of the microcosmic-macrocosmic relationship; and the Organicist historian will tend to be governed by the desire to see individual entities as components of processes which aggregate into wholes that are greater than, or qualitatively different from, the sum of their parts. (15)

Here, White looks at the nature of the organist theory, which is an integrative one, which allows historians to structure their narrative from diverse events that are arranged in an integrated entity. The integrated narratives are of more importance than individual entities. In this theory, the important thing is the whole. In addition, the historian prefers this theory to pay attention to the integrative process other than describing isolated events. The Organist theory is considered free, creative, and unconstrained by casual law (Frederick, 1992). Furthermore, the theory of mechanist of truth assumes that the world or universe is like a machine consisting of parts that can be apprehended in isolation from the whole. White says:

The Mechanistic theory of explanation turns upon the search for the causal laws that determine the outcomes of processes discovered in the historical field (1972,p.17).

Hence, the object or things that are in the historical field are related to each other as parts, and the laws, which rule it, define the relation between the objects. White also affirms that the mechanistic theory of truth looks at the writing of history as a process of observing and carrying out the laws, which have an interaction with the individual events of the historical field, in addition. This theory governs the course of history instead of taking the peculiarities and similarities of events into consideration (Frederik, 1992).

White presents the last form of explanation by an argument that is Contextualist. According to this theory of truth, the context is what matters and it is the importance of all things. The context is the historical event or act, and the context is not seen as a dead description of an event that happened. The ongoing act in context is the root metaphor of contextualism (Kumar, 2014). White suggests:

The informing presupposition of Contextualism is that events can be explained by being set within the 'context' of its occurrence. (1972, pp.17-18)

White sees the theory of contextualism as a representation of the meaning and importance of the events that existed in the historical field. He adds the explanation of the process of the occurrence of a historical event is always taken into consideration, he also underlines the functional interrelation between the events of the historical field and their occurrence in a prescribed time. Therefore, this theory asserts the link of an event and relates it to another context to provide an explanation by placing it in several contexts. Contextualism aims to achieve an integration between an event and its period.

White presents his last conceptualization of the explanation of the historical works. White's last theory is the theory of the explanation by the ideological implication. White suggests that historians express their ideological positions upon constructing their historical narratives. Therefore, he explains his theory of ideological implication as:

The ideological dimensions of a historical account reflect the ethical elements in the historian's assumptions of a particular position on the question of the nature of historical knowledge and the implications that can be drawn from the study of the past events for the understanding of the present ones. (White, 1973, p.22)

White believes that ethical inclination is an important factor in historical knowledge and any historical work is affected by the historian's position. For White, ideology is not just a direct or indirect association with political power or a social class or group in the society, on the other hand, it is what makes historians have a stance while writing or constructing a narrative from past events. Therefore, White affirms that ideology is very important and has a great influence in forming historical works. White in his theory, determine four ideologies, which are conservatism, liberalism, radicalism, and anarchism.

The four ideologies are measured according to the degree of their representation in the social change that they approve of. White in his theory chooses to consider the analogies of Karl Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia (1936) theory in terms of pace and social change. White starts with conservatism by noting, "Conservatives tend to view social change through the analogy of plantlike gradualizations" (1973, 24). That is, conservatism prefers the natural rhythm of change in the social structure without any evident change in the structural relationships. Yet conservatism allows some parts of the whole to go through inevitable changes (Kumar, 2014). This ideology sees the social change seriously. At the same time, conservatism is socially more congruent. Then, White turns to the ideology of liberalism which is also as congruent as conservatism but in a lesser manner. Liberalism tends to be more vigorous and optimistic on the issue of change in the social order. White observes:

In the both ideologies, the fundamental structure of the society is conceived to be sound, and some change is seen inevitable, but change itself is regarded as being most effective when particular parts, rather than structural relationships, of the totality are changed. (White 1978, 24)

For White, when it comes to liberalism in terms of pace and change. It tends to favor social rhythm that can be realized through parliamentary debates, enhanced educational processes, and other kinds of contests. Liberalism shows the ability to go through the process of change through selected means and it refrains from adopting any radical means to bring social changes. The following two ideologies are radicalism and anarchism. According to White, they are somehow identical and have the same views on social change. They believe in radical means of social transformation. White asserts:

Radicals and Anarchists, however, believe in the necessity of structural transformations, the former in the interest of constituting society on new bases, the latter in the interest of abolishing society' and substituting for it a 'community' of individuals held together by a shared sense of common 'humanity. (White 1978, 24)

Radicalism tends to be interested in the reconstruction of structural relationships. Moreover, it believes that it is necessary for society and that utopia in society is imminent. Radicalism sees the social change to reestablish society on brand new bases. However, Anarchism favors abolishing society to have an entirely new community of individuals who possesses common humanity. According to its views, all governments are corrupted, so anarchists seek to destruct and replace them with a new standard of the community. For anarchism, utopia is in the distant past, before the rise of the corrupted civilization. Anarchism, unlike radicalism, shows less interest in power and means of bringing changes to the social order.

The final point to mention about Hayden White's the historical narrative and how writing history and literature follow the same techniques is the use of tropes in the texts of history as Hayden supposes:

The theory of tropes provides us with a basis for classifying deep structural forms of the historical imagination in a given period of its evolution {...} They are especially useful for understanding the operations by which the contents of experience which resist description in unambiguous prose representations can be prefiguratively grasped and prepared for conscious understanding". (White, 1973, 31-34)

Here, Hayden white asserts the importance of tropes in writing history, where the use of tropes are components and elements in the poetic and figurative language. He also determines four tropes to study, which are metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony and for him, they are important to be devices used by historians while constructing their historical texts. Moreover, they are related to the modes of emplotment, argument, and ideological implication. For White, all historical narratives are metaphorical, yet they are different in the types of reductions or integration. White assumes that the historical field, which is formed by

certain events, developments, and structures, is in the minds of historians. According to him, historians resort to several tools to make a connection between the data they have and the period, in which they are. So, they use rhetorical elements in their texts. White sees that the metaphorical imagination (metaphor) makes connections by considering likenesses and the equation of the historical narrative with the events that it describes; the metonymic, by considering a part represents or stands in for any other part of a whole; the synecdochic, by considering the part represents the whole. The ironic mind is skeptical about whether making connections is possible at all.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, new historicism as a literary theory of criticism presents new interpretations of the literary texts and works, in particular literature. Literature is seen in the light of new historicism as a product of many social and cultural circumstances and forces. Literature also is a version of history. New historicism gives an explanation and understanding of the literary works concerning the time in which they are written. Hayden White, as a figure belonging to this movement, wanted to read history as a narrative. He presents his theory of historical narrative and believes that historians use or used the same strategies used in writing a literary work. He explains and argues that the historians from the beginning of writing their texts follow the construction of a narrative. Starting from a chronicle, turning it into a story, and then choosing the figurative language tropes, the emplotments, and finally the ideological implications.

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