

**Teaching Metahistory with Reference to Classical and  
Contemporary Historicist Writings**

**U. Fathima Farzana**

**Abstract**

The astonishing comeback of historical fiction in the twenty-first century is indeed because of the change in the reading trends of modern readers, re-readers and critical thinkers. Most of these novels are made into TV shows and movies and this has further added to the popularity of the genre. Students lately show a keen interest in learning historical fiction over other genres because first and foremost, these are great reads, and then history is incorporated in such a way as to make learning a ‘fun’tastic experience. History is mixed up with fantasy, surrealism and realism to any reader turn over the pages of these modern relics that portray the past.

**Keywords:** Historical Fiction, Metahistory, Analyzing History, New Historicism, Fun Learning

**Metahistory**

Metahistory is a critical tool for analyzing history lying dormant in a historical fiction. A part of New Historicism, Metahistory was popularized by Hayden White, the Johns Hopkins theoretician and historiographer. It has a set of parameters that delve deep into a historical fiction and come out with the truth – what really happened and how history has masqueraded things up all these years. In this way, Metahistory is a derivate of Deconstruction, Semiotics and New Historicism that deals with fact hidden behind the words of fiction. This paper is a research on some of the methods of teaching this exciting and wonderful historical venture produces in a classroom.

## Historical Elements

Most readers believe that historical fiction began with Sir Walter Scott. So, students must first be introduced to the historical elements in works which they would have hardly guessed to be historical. For instance, the classic *Iliad* is a depiction of the Trojan War. Archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann has applied Metahistory practically in the field and excavated the remains of Troy on the plains of Hissarlik in modern Turkey. Similarly, historian and BBC anchor Michael Wood has discovered the remains of an ancient Scandinavian ship mentioned in the last part of *Beowulf* in Jarrow, England.

## Every Major Book Is a Historical Work

It is surprising to recall that almost every book by every major writer is a historical one - right from the long lost *Gilgamesh Epic* to the contemporary works of Wilbur Smith, Ken Follett and Philippa Gregory. Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, Addison and Steele's *The Spectator*, the diaries of Pepys and Evelyn, Lord Byron's *Don Juan*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are all historical. Even *Moby Dick* is the history of "The Essex" which was stowed by a white whale off the coast of Nantucket. Likewise, Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* are great historical records. Pieces like Geoffrey of Monmouth's *A History of the Kings of Britain* (1136) and the Welsh *Mabinogion* (1050) are little read today. But they are accounts of post-Roman occupation of Britain and Wales. Other pieces like Torquosso Tasso's *Jerusalem Liberated* (1581) and Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* (1010) remain obscurities for modern readers.

## Contemporary Historical Fiction

Contemporary historical fiction works are nothing like Scott's romantic visualizations. Scott, who borrowed copiously from Maria Edgeworth and the Gothic novelists, used very little history and too much imagination. His historical timelines are scrambled and characters vague. Modern novelists are, however, very precise with their research and outrageous with what they present as facts. Dame Hilary Mantel's Anne Boleyn/Thomas Cromwell Trilogy of *Wolf Hall*

=====

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 17:11 November 2017  
**Dr. S. Jayanthi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., Editor: Teaching of English Language and Literature**  
U. Fathima Farzana

(2009), *Bring up the Bodies* (2012) and *The Mirror and the Light* (2017) are examples of realism, especially that of feministic realism.

Philippa Gregory's *The Red Queen* (2010), *The White Princess* (2013) and *The King's Curse* (2014) are similar and concentrate on the greatest female monarchs of history who have been abandoned or executed for their opinions. History and myths are popularized by Wilbur Smith in his Ancient Egypt Series of *The River God* (1994), *The Seventh Scroll* (1995), *Warlock* (2001), *The Quest* (2007), *Desert God* (2014) and *Pharaoh* (2016). These books bring out the drawbacks and superstition of ancient Egyptians and the monarchs who used culture and legend to enslave their subjects. Paulo Coelho's *The Spy* (2016) is a history of Paris during World War II from the view of exotic dancer Mata Hari. Among all these, Ken Follett's colossal realist narratives are considered the best for their historic accuracy and their vivid portrayals of objects from the medieval Stephen of Blois to President Woodrow Wilson and Adolf Hitler.

### **How to Introduce Students to Historical Fiction**

Introducing students to historical fiction can be a delightful experience if done correctly. They must first be acquainted with history as mentioned in the history books. Then they must be taught to read denotative and connotative meanings in the text. Ambiguity, structural deviances, fragmentary narratives, rearranging of historical events and archaism must be read and critically reread to find out the subtle hints in the fiction. Application of Metahistory and its parameters comes next. Story, chronicle, emplotment through arguments and ideological statements have to be the first layer of Metahistory. Looking for tropes and applying the parameters mentioned by historians like Jules Michelet, Leopold von Ranke, Alexis de Tocqueville and Jacob Burckhardt. Historical applications remain incomplete without the necessary fictional parameters set by Johann Gottfried von Herder, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Benedetto Croce. The Base-Superstructure n-d analysis is necessary as;

...any transformation in the Base (comprised of the means of production and the modes of relationship among them), there will be a transformation in the components of the Superstructure (social and cultural institutions)...are usually

involved to explain such a phenomenon as the Great Depression or the Fall of the Roman Empire (White 11).

Formist/Organicist/Mechanistic/Contextualist categorizations of historical narration has to be taught next. The plot must first be deconstructed into historical field (the setting and the atmosphere), historical timeline and historical objects (characters/symbols). Then the events must be analysed to designate one of the four categories mentioned above: Formist (identifying the generic and specific attributes assigned to historical objects), Organicist (searching for laws behind historical processes), Mechanistic (acts of objects originating outside the historical field but contributing to the making of history) and Contextualist (events explained through contexts of their occurrences and through colligative threads that link the objects to the fields).

### **Ideological Implication**

Ideological implication simply labels the objects Apocalypticist (actions based on divine revelation), Reactionary (an eternally valid act) or Fascist. Objects are also named Conservatives and Liberals in a much widely accepted sense.

Researchers have come out with shocking details like the faked murder of Edward II when he actually escaped into France and led a happy life there while the citizens of England mourned over an empty coffin. The Fieschi Letter – supposedly dictated by Edward II to his son from France – is used in the researches of Kathryn Warner and published as *Edward II: The Unconditional King* (2014). Ken Follett’s *World without End* (2001) is also a conspiracy on the same letter changing the lives of ordinary people while the aristocrats fall into intrigues.

### **Wilbur Smith’s Narratives**

Wilbur Smith’s narratives operate in a whole other way – that of myth and legend to mock history. While Follett and Gregory use realism, Smith chooses magic realism. His Ancient Egypt series, especially the last installment *Pharaoh* (2016), are subtle satires on royalty. *Pharaoh* depicts a female hero Serena who overpowers the magnificent Rameses II.

When Rameses' mind is choked with myths of Seth and Bast, Serena fights their enemies with sword and might.

### **Past, Present and the Future**

Historical narratives are records not only of some ancient culture lost and gone but also that of the present. Seeing the present in the past is what the researcher terms *relative history*. Relative is a term borrowed from Einstein's Theory of Relativity – how time and space are not constant but vary with each person. Similarly, history varies with each and every reader's views and culture. History in historical fiction is how the readers/students view history based on their cultural-racial backdrops. All historical novelists - from Scott to Smith - write about the present as much as the past. History is merely a medium that carries the present for them:

History, the past as it really happened, the thing that is the object of study and research, it certainly has something to do with that world, that mental picture which each of us makes of the past...the historical novel is a form of history. It is a way of treating the past (Butterfield 2).

### **Metahistory Changes the Classroom into a Laboratory**

Metahistory changes the classroom into a laboratory and the students into researchers looking for something new in something old. The results can be fascinating while the process remains a fun experience for both learner and teacher. It is a learner-centered approach as most of the work is done by the learners and the teacher's duty is just to guide them. As a recent branch of multidisciplinary approaches to literature, Metahistory can be a tool to instruct history, literature, language and philosophy in a classroom. A whole new world of facts and fictions can operate at a whole other level and instruct many things beyond the domains of any one particular genre. And a teacher needs to be very well versed in history if he or she wants to teach metahistory – also be able to teach what is fact and what is fiction.

---

---

### **Works Cited**

Butterfield, Herbert. *The Historical Novel: An Essay*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1924. Print.

McDonough, Frank. *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print.

White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Print.

---

U. Fathima Farzana  
Assistant Professor  
Sri S.R.N.M College  
Sattur 626 203  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[farzusman1992@gmail.com](mailto:farzusman1992@gmail.com)