

The Political Unconscious and *Jane Eyre*
by Fredric Jameson by Charlotte Bronte

Outline of Jameson's Work:

Political interpretation is the most important: the political perspective is “the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation” (17).

I. Dilemma: how is the distant history of the cultural past relevant to the present? This is a conflict between antiquarianism and modernizing relevance → We need a philosophy of history that will overcome this.

- A. A successful philosophy must respect both
 - 1. “the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past”
 - 2. and “the solidarity of its [i.e. the cultural past's] polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles with those of the present day” (18).
- B. A successful philosophy must also be consistent with contemporary world of consumer capitalism and a multinational system.

II. There are a few possible philosophies of history that we could use:

- A. The idea of “progress” from the French Enlightenment
 - 1. Jameson argues that this idea is discredited b/c of its “hegemonic embodiments in positivism and classical liberalism (19)”
- B. The organic populism/nationalism, articulated in central and Eastern Europe
 - 1. Jameson argues that this is discredited b/c of its hegemonic embodiment of “nationalism.”
- C. Marxism is the answer.

III. Only Marxism can fill the requirements as a history that is “philosophically coherent and [an] ideologically compelling resolution to the dilemma of historicism evoked above (19)”

- A. History regains its urgency/importance if it is retold within the “unity of a great collective story (19),” which has a fundamental theme: the struggle to extract a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity.
- B. We need to uncover expressions of class struggle and historical society/culture in literary texts.
- C. All texts are political; no text is separate from its political and social context. In other words, we have not yet successfully created a realm of Freedom, so necessity (i.e. the historical and social reality) is always a part of the text
- D. We have a new hermeneutic (method of interpretation) that focuses on the “unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts (20).”

IV. Jameson aims to show how Marxism “subsumes other interpretive modes or systems” (47).

- A. Marxism gives tools to overcome limits of the other systems, while retaining their more positive findings.

1. This is done by putting the author's work in a historical context, so that the method of producing the work is part of the "text" itself, and part of the phenomenon that needs to be explained.

Jameson's Take on other interpretive modes and systems:

V. Critiques of Historicism and Hermeneutic (Interpretative) Activity

A. Post-structuralism

1. The French post-structuralist critique: Grand narratives are not good, because they are contingent on their end points, and thus flawed and limited.
 - i. This type of literary interpretation validates "absence and the negative" and asserts its "necessity and [the] priority of totalizing thought" (21).
 - ii. Interpretation also frequently over-simplifies a text by rewriting it according to the structure of another story, and proposing this as the "ultimate hidden or unconscious *meaning* of the first one" (22).
 - e.g. identifying Oedipal complexes in texts and asserting that this is the meaning of a particular pattern of events
2. Jameson's rebuttal:
 - i. The post-structuralist identification is correct, but the critique is misplaced .
 - ii. Historicism doesn't fall prey to this trap because it seeks to "reassert the specificity of the political content of everyday life and of individual fantasy-experience." (22)

B. Althusser's branch of contemporary Marxism

1. The Althusserian critique of the three historical forms of causality:
 - i. Mechanical causality: like billiard ball cause and effect. Althusser rejects this idea.
 - ii. Expressive causality: inner essence/Outer phenomena theory. Any event/phenomena that occurs is expressive of some inner essence of the whole. Althusser also rejects this idea.
 - iii. Structural causality: a structure is made up of its effects and nothing else. (the effects of the structure = the structure). Althusser affirms this idea.
2. Jameson's rebuttal:
 - i. Mechanical causality retains "a pure local validity in cultural analysis (25)," i.e. some events have a simple, billiard-ball cause and effect relationship. It is not a concept which can be evaluated as right or wrong, rather it is a law of our material social and cultural life.
 - a. Example: the publishing house crisis and the change in the "inner form" of a novel
 - ii. Expressive causality is another local law in historical reality. We formulate history in the following way to acknowledge Althusser's objections, but at the same time create a local place for expressive causality: "History is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in the textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through

its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious” (35).

a. Example: an allegorical interpretation (of the Old Testament, for instance), which reflects “a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality” (34).

iii. Althusser sees only one structure: the modes of production, which is an absent cause. See diagram on p.36. Everything is mediated through the structure.

VI. A second dilemma, in the context of the Althusserian critique discussed above: Is the text a free-floating autonomous object or does it reflect or replicate ideologically some context? (see p.38)

A. Example of this conflict: The University can be interpreted as an autonomous organization that tries to “reinvent a privileged place for philosophy proper” (38), or as a messenger of institutional or bureaucratic infrastructures

B. Source of the ambiguity: The concept of *mediation*, which is the relationship between levels of a structure, and the possibility of adapting findings from one level to another.

This idea locally overcomes the fragmentation of different regions of social life.

1. Althusserian structure is related to idea of “semi-autonomy.” The structure must relate as much as it separates, so that the structure does not collapse upon itself. A Marxist structure relates things by their structural difference.

(Difference here is similar to the Derridan notion of “differance.” It is a relational concept, not an “inert inventory of unrelated diversity” (41).)

2. One cannot understand differences between things without a backdrop of a more general identity or context. Mediation allows us to establish this initial identity.

VII. Greimas presents an apparently static analytical scheme

A. Jameson sees this scheme as useful because it maps the limits of specific ideological consciousness.

B. This structure manifests part of the text which the text represses: It is a tool for understanding the political unconscious of the text.

C. The text is steeped with the real, and the ideological structure of the culture, society or historical context. The text replicates these two elements, while also reflecting and commenting on them. In an interpretation, we may use Greimas’ rectangle to recreate the subtext of the real and its ideological structure in the text. In doing so, we necessarily rewrite the text, repeating the original process. (See p. 45-47, 82)

VIII. Three concentric frameworks for understanding a text.

A. Political history- the event in time and the sequence of other happenings at the time.

1. Here the text is understood as the “individual literary work or utterance” (p.76).

2. Claude Levi-Strauss’s “The Structural Study of Myth” is an example of this.

3. This frame allows us see the aesthetic act as an ideological or symbolic act.

B. Society-the struggle between classes

1. The text is now only an individual utterance/"parole" in a whole collection of antagonistic class discourses.
 2. The text is a symbolic action in the struggle between classes.
 3. The relationship between classes is purely relational: the ruling class will try to legitimize its own power, while the oppositional class will try to challenge the dominant "value system."
 4. To understand this parole in its larger context, we must strive to understand the langue itself. Because the langue is an ideal construct, we can never fully see it. The langue, or larger class discourse is organized around smaller units called *ideologemes*. The defining characteristic of an ideologeme is that it can "manifest itself either as a pseudoidea—a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice—or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the "collective characters" which are the classes in opposition." (p.83)
- C. History-sequences of modes of production and the succession of various human societies.
1. Texts are symbolic messages transmitted by various sign systems, which are "traces or anticipations of modes of production" (76).

Jameson and *Jane Eyre*

-Consider *Jane Eyre* in the three frameworks.

- A. Political History: Consider the text as a symbolic act.
1. Here we see the story reaffirming the role of the family, as Jane takes up her spot as mother at the end of the novel (524).
 2. What is the symbolic importance of religion in the story? See Helen Burn's discussion on p.75, and the last paragraph of the novel which quotes St. John's letter.
 3. The Greimarian structure of self and society, collective and individual, that we discussed previously.
- B. Society: Consider examples of class struggle in the text, and how the text relates to the rest of the 19th century social structure.
1. The contrast between Mr. Brocklehurst's family and the Lowood girls (69).
 2. Jane feels more at ease knowing that Mrs. Fairfax is not a "great dame" (111).
 3. Jane's relationships to her pupils at the village school (426).
 4. The colonial economy and practices of primogeniture (354).
 2. Jane as the dominant parent in the family structure at the end of the novel. The father figure, Mr. Rochester, is subordinate to her.
- C. History: Try to put the story in its broader historical context.