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CULTURAL CONTEXT: AN ARGUMENT FOR NEW HISTORICISM OVER POSTMODERNISM IN ANALYZING POPULAR LITERATURE

Conor King

John Carroll University, cpking18@jcu.edu

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CULTURAL CONTEXT: AN ARGUMENT FOR NEW HISTORICISM OVER
POSTMODERNISM IN ANALYZING POPULAR LITERATURE

A Thesis Submitted to the
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By
Conor P. King
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The thesis of Conor P. King is hereby accepted:

Reader- Dr. James Krukones

Date

Reader- Dr. Marcus Gallo

Date

Advisor- Dr. Brenda Wirkus

Date

Author- Conor P. King

Date

Table of Contents:

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Critical Theories- Their Roles, Their History, Their Variates...3	
Chapter Two: Postmodern Critical Theory.....	12
Chapter Three: New Historic Critical Theory.....	17
Chapter Four: Analysis of <i>Harry Potter</i> Series.....	23
Chapter Five: Analysis if <i>A Song of Ice and Fire</i> Series.....	37
Chapter Six: Analysis of Song Lyrics.....	50
Conclusion and Final Thoughts.....	58
Bibliography.....	61

Introduction

Literary criticism is not a science. Any number of critical theories have permeated literary study since theorists began studying literature on an academic level. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, philosophers and other thinkers have taken the time to interpret literature and formulate their own opinions as to the author's intent and meaning. Though often thought of as a tool of an academic, literary criticism has come to the forefront of the cultural zeitgeist due to the rise of popular literature on a mass scale. In recent years, certain series of books or songs have become so popular that they have transcended the bounds of academic study and become cultural focal points akin to household names. Simply saying the name *Harry Potter* evokes the series itself and a myriad of thoughts about what the series is about and how to interpret the work. The website *Pottermore*, for example, features articles by J.K. Rowling herself on the various characters and themes in the series and fan theories as well. While these are not the most academic of interpretations, they do speak to the growing trend to analyze these characters and ideas.

The focus of this thesis will be on two types of literary and critical theories, Postmodernism and New Historicism, and an analysis of which of these two theories works better when analyzing recent culture, especially popular literature. While older and other theories can provide context to understand these works, the two theories presented will better allow the reader to understand the entirety of the work. New Historicism provides a better understanding and analysis of popular culture than does Postmodernism. That is because New Historicism specifically accounts for the cultural context and connections of a work.

The following thesis is broken down into six chapters. The first of these chapters outlines a brief history of literary criticism. This is done to provide the reader with an understanding of the term “literary criticism” for reference while reading the rest of the paper. Along with a brief history of literary criticism, I also provide examples of types of literary criticism and examples of how to properly criticize a piece of work. This is done not only to provide context, but also as an example of the tools and methods a literary critic would use in their analysis.

The second and third chapters of this work deal with Postmodernism and New Historicism. Again, this is done for clarification. Without a working knowledge of what these two types of criticism entail, there is no way to properly contextualize my argument. These chapters deal with the formation, history, and practices of these styles of literary criticism. It is hoped that an understanding of these types of criticisms provides some necessary background.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters of this thesis deal with analyses of certain works of popular culture to further explain my position. In these chapters I will be looking at *Harry Potter*, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and various music lyrics with a focus on both Postmodern and New Historicist interpretations. By doing this, I hope to demonstrate why New Historicism is the better choice to analyze popular culture.

Finally, I present a conclusion to the thesis, providing some further thoughts about both this project and related subjects. In doing so, I offer further support for my thesis.

Chapter One: Critical Theories: Their Role, Their History, Their Variates

To best understand the concepts addressed in this thesis, one must first understand the general concept behind literary criticism and critical theories. Thus, I will outline a brief history of literary criticism and describe, in some detail, a few of the different theories that scholars espoused.

Literary criticism encompasses a wide array of techniques and schools meant to interpret and understand a piece of literature. It is an attempt to understand the characteristics of a literary work through one of many different critical lenses. It is also a much older practice than often thought, dating back at least to the ancient Greek philosophers. Literary critic M.A.R. Habib explains:

We might begin by recalling that “theory” and critical reflection on literature began at least 2500 years ago, and have been conducted by some of the greatest Western thinkers and writers, ranging from Plato and Aristotle, through Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, ago, most great thinkers, critics, and literary artists would not have understood what was meant by reading literature as literature. They knew that literature had integral connections with philosophy, religion, politics, and morality; they knew, in other words, that literature was richly related to all aspects of people’s lives (Habib 12-13).

These writers and philosophers understood a basic idea: literature plays such an important role in the life of the populace that the philosophies they developed for life can be attributed to literature as well. To do so meant to consider literature to be art in the same way as a painting, i.e to be subject to critical analysis.

Furthermore, without literary criticism, society would be left without a way in which to characterize or define literature.

If we had no tradition of critical interpretation, if we were left with the “texts” themselves, we would be completely bewildered. We would not know how to classify a given writer as Romantic, classical, or modern. We would not know that a given poem was epic or lyric, mock-heroic, or even that it was a poem. We would be largely unaware of which tradition a given writer was working in and how she was trying to subvert it in certain ways. We would not be able to arrive at any comparative assessment of writers in terms of literary merit. We would not even be able to interpret the meanings of individual lines or words in any appropriate context (Habib 13).

Without these classifications and definitions that came about due to literary criticism, society would lose the way in which it has been able to analyze and interpret literature since the practice originated. For example, one only needs to look at a work by Lord Byron, such as “She Walks in Beauty”:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies (Byron 1).

We, as literary critics, understand that this poem is an example of second generation British Romanticism. We understand this due to the poem displaying many of the themes and ideas presented in that generation of Romantic literature, such as a focus on nature and the almost supernatural quality of the subject's beauty.

It is also important to note that literary criticism is not exact. There is no one correct way to interpret a literary work. As James Seaton, professor of English at Michigan State, explains:

Literary criticism is surely not a science. Unlike practitioners of the natural sciences, literary critics so far have been unable to agree about standards of proof and methods of inquiry. The doubts Plato raised in his dialogue *Ion* persist today; not only is literary criticism not a science, it is not certain that it deserves to be considered an art or craft either(Seaton 1).

Understanding this point is essential for an understanding of the rest of this thesis. No one literary theory is "correct", or should be considered definitive.

Simply understanding the history of literary criticism is not enough. One must also understand the various forms of literary criticism that scholars use to analyze works of literature. Again, there are multiple interpretations of the classifications of the various criticisms that have emerged over the years.

A survey of literary criticism from Plato and Aristotle through the cultural studies of the twenty-first century suggests that the history of literary criticism should not be seen either as a long progress toward a culmination in which literary criticism eventually becomes a science or as a mere chaos of opinions whose only ordering principle is chronology. Literary

criticism may be seen as a continuing conversation among three traditions, two of them originating with Plato – the Platonic and the Neoplatonic – and the third, founded by Plato’s student Aristotle, which may be called the Aristotelian or humanistic tradition (Seaton 11).

Whether one agrees with Seaton is almost irrelevant to the point of the thesis. But it does speak to the point that there are many interpretations of literary criticism that need to be taken into consideration if one wishes to study literary criticism. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be focusing on the theories in chronological order.

The history of literary criticism begins in the Greek and Roman world. Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers were among the first to analyze literature with their philosophical views. This practice backdates to even Horace in his work *Ars poetica*. Written as a poem, it still aims to teach the masses about Horace’s views on the nature and purpose of poetry.

The influence of Horace's *Ars poetica* has been vast, exceeding the influence of Plato, and in many periods, even that of Aristotle. Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus) is known primarily as a poet, a composer of odes, satires, and epistles. In the realm of literary criticism, he has conventionally been associated with the notions that “a poem is like a painting,” that poetry should “teach and delight,” as well as the idea that poetry is a craft which requires labor (Habib 43).

Many others, such as Byron and Wallace Stevens, used Horace as a model for their literary theory, writing their theories and ideas as poems to engage readers.

Through the Middle Ages, the Church was responsible for maintaining literary criticism, using it as a way to educate the masses about morality. However, with the rise of the universities in Europe, students of a more secular nature could obtain the same kind of learning that had largely been available only to the clergy. In these universities, scholars were exposed to the ancient philosophers for the first time thanks to the efforts of the eastern cultures in preserving knowledge.

Through these universities swept the philosophy of the “new” Aristotle, the recently recovered works of Aristotle on natural history, metaphysics, ethics, and politics, made available to the West through translations from Arabic and Greek. The foremost of the Arab Aristotelian thinkers was Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (Habib 64).

With this rise in the study of Aristotle came a renewed interest in the study of literary criticism, becoming a focal point in the study of grammar, one of the seven distinguished liberal arts.

These ideas brought forth due to the rise of the universities led to intellectual renaissances through Europe, broadly referred to as the Enlightenment, and specific events such as the French Revolution. From these ideas, and the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, rose Romanticism.

Romanticism was a broad intellectual and artistic disposition that arose toward the end of the eighteenth century and reached its zenith during the early decades of the nineteenth century. The ideals of Romanticism included an intense focus on expressing human subjectivity, an exaltation of nature, of childhood and spontaneity, of primitive forms of society, of

human passion and emotion, of the poet, of the sublime, and of imagination as a more comprehensive and inclusive faculty than reason.

The most fundamental philosophical disposition of Romanticism has often been seen as irony, an ability to accommodate conflicting perspectives of the world. Developing certain insights of Kant, the Romantics often insisted on artistic autonomy and attempted to free art from moralistic and utilitarian constraints (Habib 139).

Romanticism, in literature, expressed the passion of the writers and explored their desires and their views on truth. Nowhere is this more prominent than in John Keats' *Ode to a Grecian Urn*:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (Keats 1)

Within these last lines of this poem, Keats presents a clear view of Romantic literary theory. For the Romantics, truth can be found in whatever the viewer finds to be beautiful. Harkening back to Kant's view of the sublime as something that cannot be described by the human condition, beauty does not need to be described either. If the viewer finds something to be beautiful, whatever it is, there is truth.

Finally, one should note the rise of social critical theory in the early 20th century. This is best addressed by looking at the Marxist school of thought. Based on the ideas of 19th century philosopher Karl Marx, Marxist literary theory attempts to define literature

by the social and economic situation of a character or characters within the work. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto*, define the basis of Communism as the following:

The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (Marx 12).

When applied to literature, this theory has the purpose of understanding the socioeconomic status of a character and how this status defines their role within a story. Could *A Christmas Carol* have the same message for its readers if Scrooge had been poor? Due to the very lessons presented within *A Christmas Carol*, it is doubtful. Scrooge is defined by his money and place in society.

Understanding Marxism is essential to understanding the rest of this thesis because many of its central ideas are the progenitors of the ideas that are addressed below.

Marxism has also generated a rich tradition of literary and cultural criticism. Many branches of modern criticism – including historicism, feminism, deconstruction, postcolonial and cultural criticism – are

indebted to the insights of Marxism, which often originated in the philosophy of Hegel (Habib 196).

Without the work of Marx, the cultural background explored within New Historicism would not have nearly as much meaning.

However, to fully understand literary criticism, one should see an example. For that reason, I now criticize Dylan Thomas' *Do not go gentle into that good night* through the Romantic school of thought.

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

When analyzing this poem as a Romantic piece, the first thing one should note is the subject itself. Death is portrayed as something to be avoided as it stops one from experiencing the joys that life can bring. One does not understand what happens after death. This poem is also one characterized by its passion. Even if one knows death is coming, or as the author states “Though wise men at their end know dark is right”, they still try to avoid it at all costs. Death is the end. It is final. Life, conversely, is something to be experienced in its fullest, prolonged for as long as possible. Therefore, one’s passion should be focused on avoiding death at all costs. It should also be noted that the author makes no mention of what comes after death. One does not know and can hazard no guess as to what may come. This is because death is the ultimate form of sublimity. No matter how much humanity learns or strives, it will never understand what happens after death. That fact alone causes death to be both terrifying and awe-inspiring in its uncertainty. Yet they continue to yearn and strive. Striving in the face of uncertainty, letting passion guide, is the ultimate form of Romanticism.

Chapter Two: Postmodern Critical Theory

In this section of the thesis, I offer a treatment of Postmodern literary theory. To do so, I explain the core principles of postmodernism and provide, for context, some of the more famous postmodern works. This portion of the thesis will also explain Postmodern literary theory and its methods of analysis.

Postmodern literature follows, naturally, a similar structure and message as modernism. As described by *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*:

One can name as “postmodernist” the dissatisfaction with this atemporal temper, along with the disposition to attend to that which registers the passage of and exposure to time rather than its gathering the assumption that literature approaches to the condition of poetry, postmodernism means the tendency to assume that literature is intrinsically narrative. Indeed, the study of literary modernism itself seems subsequently to have been affected by this shift, as a version of modernism that had previously been focused on its representative poets – Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and Stevens – has been retrofitted by the taste of scholars and students alike to shift the focus markedly to its novelists: James, Conrad, Lawrence, Richardson, Joyce, and Woolf (Connor 71-72).

What this means is that postmodern literature may, in fact, keep several of the ideas and beliefs of the modernist movement that preceded it. For example, focus on the world, current events, and social change are relevant in both the modern and postmodern. The

differences are present, but tend to be focused on form rather than substance. This idea becomes important as the shift from popular culture to high culture is discussed. There is also a shift away from considering poetry literature. Consider *A Dialogue of Self and Soul* by William Butler Yeats.

I

My Soul. I summon to the winding ancient stair;

Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,

Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,

Upon the breathless starlit air,

Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;

Fix every wandering thought upon

That quarter where all thought is done:

Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?

My Self. The consecrated blade upon my knees

Is Sato's ancient blade, still as it was,

Still razor-keen, still like a looking-glass

Unspotted by the centuries;

That flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn

From some court-lady's dress and round

The wooden scabbard bound and wound,

Can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn (Yeats 1)

There is no clear narrative structure in this work. It does not tell a story. Therefore, according to postmodern belief, it should not be considered literature.

Despite the difference between postmodern and modern literature being of form rather than substances, differences do exist in the natures of the works. Primarily, in postmodernism, one sees a reliance on paradox or even the unreliable narrator as literary devices. This form of literature tends to distrust grand narratives and harbors suspicion of art as a greater concept.

Two “grand narratives” have determined western self-understanding – the Enlightenment story of progress and political emancipation, and the Hegelian narrative of the manifestation of scientific reason. Both of these have foundered, he declares, along with every other metadiscursive attempt at organizing modernity’s immense sprawl into something coherent and socially useful. Postmodernity, by contrast, recognizes the impossibility of this undertaking and its need for legitimation, and recoils from it (Connor 37).

Postmodern theory would seem to remove the conventional notion of the hero and other standard tropes to explore a paradoxical shift toward what is believed to be an actual truth or even a lack of truth in certain cases.

Some of the most famous postmodern authors are Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, and Joseph Heller. These writers deal in absurdities, such as paradox, represented in this quote from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. "The Texan turned out to be good-natured, generous and likable. In three days no one could stand him" (25). Or “But Yossarian couldn’t be happy, even though the Texan didn’t want him

to be, because outside the hospital there was still nothing funny going on” (34). This sort of playful perversion of standard writing permeates this book for adding absurdity to the concept of war. If the modernists are searching for answers to the problems of the world in their writing, the postmodernists feel as though there are no answers and that they have lost the world.

In his novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon deals with World War Two, in a way like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* treated World War One. Unlike Fitzgerald's novel, the war in *Gravity's Rainbow* serves merely as a backdrop for the characters, not a defining event. Even though the events of the book are directly related to the war, references to the event itself are very rare or vague in their presentation.

Oughtn't he to be doing something . . . get on to the operations room at Stanmore, they must have it on the Channel radars—no: no time, really. Less than five minutes Hague to here (the time it takes to walk down to the teashop on the corner . . . for light from the sun to reach the planet of love . . . no time at all). Run out in the street? Warn the others? (Pynchon 5).

This passage illustrates just how much background even a significant event like a war is to the postmodern author. While the speaker acknowledges the event is going on, his thought patterns show his mind wandering to other concepts like the time it takes to walk to a tea shop.

As for Postmodern literary theory, in its most basic form it is an analysis of certain types of literary tools as opposed to a discussion of the narrative of the work. For

example, the postmodern theorist will focus on the unreliable narrator or the paradox. What is important are the multiple interpretations within a single piece of literature.

To further clarify these concepts, I provide the thoughts of one of the most prominent postmodern philosophers, Jacques Derrida. He wrote extensively on postmodernism, both as a philosophical and literary construct. Derrida provides context for the subjectivity of postmodern literature in his writings about genre, stating:

I merely said, and then repeated: genres are not to be mixed; I will not mix them. As long as I release these utterances (which others might call speech acts) in a form yet scarcely determined, given the They are legion, as I could demonstrate. They form an open and essentially unpredictable series. But you may be tempted by at least two types of audience, two modes of interpretation, or, if you prefer to give these words more of a chance, then you may be tempted by two different genres of hypothesis (Derrida 36-37).

In this excerpt, Derrida argues against the notion that genres cannot be mixed. His argument consists of the belief that literary genres, and, therefore, literature itself, are open-ended. He calls them by the Biblical name “legion” because they are many and combined. It also speaks to the postmodern belief that literature can have multiple interpretations. If no set genre of a literary work can be defined, then how can one set interpretation be given?

As this discussion progresses, the core beliefs of postmodern literary theory and of postmodernism itself become important as they are placed in direct comparison with

New Historicism with the goal of determining which of the two literary theories better analyzes popular culture.

Chapter Three: New Historicist Critical Theory

In this discussion, we will examine some of the core principles of the New Historicist movement. With a list of these principles comes a deeper understanding of the New Historicist approach to cultural theory. Literary theorist A. Hiram Vesser, in his work *The New Historicism*, explains:

A newcomer to New Historicism might feel reassured that, for all its heterogeneity, key assumptions continually reappear and bind together the avowed practitioners and even some of their critics: these assumptions are as follows:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practices it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. finally, as emerges powerfully in this volume, that a critical method and language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe (Vesser 9-10).

The five principles of New Historicism will be the guides through which I will analyze the texts that follow.

New Historicism is an analysis of the cultural trends of an era through the literature that the era produced. Simply put, the New Historicist movement within the

literary world, at least, is an attempt to understand the time during which writers created their work through an analysis of the cultural trends present. For example, one can understand Elizabethan England through a reading of one of Shakespeare's plays. Literary historian and author Stephen Greenblatt elaborates on this trend and its difference from postmodernism in his collected essays *Cultural Mobility*:

In the latter half of the twentieth century, many in the social sciences and humanities gleefully proclaimed the demise of a set of traditional assumptions about cultural identity. Notions of wholeness, teleological development, evolutionary progress, and ethnic authenticity were said to have been dismantled forever. A few lamented their passing, but most scholars energetically grappled with brave new theories of hybridity, network theory, and the complex “flows” of people, goods, money, and information across endlessly shifting social landscapes. But as the new century unfolds, it has become increasingly clear that the bodies of the deceased the nation-state and to the atavistic passions of religious and ethnic identity find themselves confronting a global political landscape in which neither nationalism nor identity politics shows any intention of disappearing (Greenblatt 12-13).

In the context of this discussion, Greenblatt is referring to the subjectivity of the postmodern movement. Postmodernism is rooted in the rejection of objective characteristics. Humanity, on the other hand, is defined by their subject lives. New Historicism tries to understand literary works through an examination of common cultural characteristics. Current trends in literature embrace the cultural landscape of a

piece of writing to understand the article wholly thoroughly, as seen in such works as Thrity Umrigar's story of class divides in India in *The Space Between Us*. Without an understanding of the culture surrounding a work, one cannot understand the work in its entirety.

The discussion in this section of the paper is not a discussion of literature that features national or cultural connections, but how certain cultural themes influence the work. I analyze this by discussing writers who have been influenced by the cultural landscape of the world around them. An example of this is Greenblatt's analysis of Shakespeare.

This enterprise, which is highly traditional, runs a high risk of the teleological triumphalism that characterized the translatio and figura models of cultural mobility that I briefly described in the first chapter. One almost inevitably writes as if those sources had a final and perfect form to which they were aspiring – the form that Shakespeare magisterially realized. The problem with this fantasy is not that it exaggerates the great playwright's achievement – it would be difficult ever to do so – but rather that it distorts and transforms. He was certainly capable of making stories up on his own, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but he clearly preferred picking something up ready-made and moving it into his own sphere, as if the phenomenon of mobility itself gave him pleasure. And he never hinted that the mobility would now have to stop: on the contrary, he seems to have deliberately opened his plays to the possibility of ceaseless change (Greenblatt 87-88).

Greenblatt uses Shakespeare to show that even a writer on the level of the bard found influence in the work of others and transfixed their ideas to the culture in which he worked and lived. Not even Shakespeare is immune from cultural influence. He did not create his plays without using the world around him as an example. This is further made clear by the supposed lost play of Shakespeare claimed to be found by Lewis Theobald and made a play of his own.

Theobald's play confirms what one would in any case expect from the title of the lost work: Shakespeare and Fletcher evidently took their plot from the story of Cardenio as it is episodically recounted in Part One of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. (Cervantes' great novel, translated into English by Thomas Shelton and published in 1612, must have been a literary sensation in London in 1613, when Shakespeare and Fletcher's play was first performed.) Loosely intertwined with the early adventures of Don Quixote and his servant Sancho Panza, the Cardenio story is a characteristic Renaissance tragicomedy of male friendship and sexual betrayal, the kind of story that had gripped Shakespeare's imagination throughout his career, from the early *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to the late *Two Noble Kinsmen* (Greenblatt 90).

If this were indeed Shakespeare's work, it shows that the author had been reading other works of the era and using their ideas coupled with his own cultural identity within his plays. Certainly, if *Julius Caesar* and *Henry V* and a slough of others are any indications, he had a knowledge of history. Even if these plays are inaccurate in their historical authenticity, he subjected them to the cultural biases and ideas of his time. *Romeo and*

Juliet may be set in Verona, but the concept of feuding noble families would have been familiar to an English audience. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* features fairies and magic, but the underlying tale of falling in love is universal. No matter the outward subject of the works, the underlying themes and ideas were either universal or rooted in English cultural acceptance.

But it is not just within England, or the English language, that one can find these trends analyzed. Other scholars have looked at the cultural influences found within some of history's other great writers. In analyzing Goethe and Germany, Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus agrees with Greenblatt.

Berlin can serve as an example of this in the same way that Paris, London, and New York can in other respects. Anyone attempting to write a guide to literary Berlin would no longer be able to limit themselves to German authors but would have to also consider authors working in Arabic, Russian, the Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertész, writing in his native Hungarian, as well as Syrians, Iranians, and Turks who pen their works in German and who have developed followings in Germany but still remain relatively unknown in their lands of origin (Greenblatt 107).

Literature and the literary landscape of an area cannot but be affected by the area as well. It is very much a tapestry of the people and circulated ideas in a culture during a certain point in time. To bring these ideas around again to New Historicism, these scholars note how the different cultures influence the literature of a region.

New Historicism is a literary theory that considers the possibility of objective view of reality. New Historicist scholars often relate the works of the authors they study

back to commonality among cultures and countries. However, this is not a complete rejection of the Postmodern movement, nor its ideas. Rather, New Historicism allows for the introduction of the historical context of the literary discussion in a way that Postmodernism does not and, therefore, allows for a more comprehensive study of literature. When one wishes to discuss popular culture, especially within literary boundaries, it is important to consider the cultural location of the author. While Postmodernism may provide researchers with some answers, a significant portion of popular culture does not adhere to the principles of the postmodern movement. With a focus on New Historicism, the scholar can work with a more comprehensive vision of contemporary popular literature.

Chapter Four: Analysis of *Harry Potter* Series

Presented in this chapter and the chapter that follows is an analysis of certain tropes that have reemerged within the bounds of popular culture and distinguish themselves from the Postmodern. These two chapters will deal with the concepts of the grand narrative and literary allusions, both of which eschew postmodern theory as unimportant, but, in fact, play a central role in both *Harry Potter* and the subject of the next chapter, *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

It will first be helpful to provide a definition of popular literature, given by English scholar Victor E. Neuberg. I provide this definition so that the reader may have a reference point for the works I choose to analyze.

At its simplest, the definition of popular literature is what the unsophisticated reader has selected for pleasure. Such a reader may, of course, come from any class in society, although the primary appeal of popular literature has been to the poor – and, by the end of the eighteenth century, also to children. This literature has comprised non-establishment, non-official publications; but it has also included the religious tracts which one group in society thought that another group ought to read for its own good – and these were distributed in extremely large numbers (Neuberg 19).

The distinction addressed is between what the average reader will be reading as opposed to what the scholar or academic reader may be reading. This thesis focuses on works that are considered popular. These are novels which have permeated the cultural landscape and have left a significant imprint on society but are not often discussed in academic

settings. While these works may have theoretical notions to be discussed, such as the theory presented below, they are not often the works studied in academic or scholarly settings. Instead, readers enjoy these works without a need for further analysis beyond whether the work provides pleasure. Being popular does not mean that the work is not well-written or good. It only means that, as of this writing, academic circles have not embraced these works in the same manner as the public.

In addition to being popular, many of these works share certain tropes, or common literary devices. To address these tropes that have made a reemergence, one must understand the definition of trope. These are certain themes and ideas within a piece of literature that a reader can reasonably assume to be within a story due to its genre or structure. For example, it is reasonable to assume that a love story will have a moment when the protagonist expresses a desire for whomever they are pursuing during the work. Within the context of this section, I will bring forth many themes and ideas presented within some of the more notable recent literature and use them to highlight popular literature's dismissal of a few key Postmodern tenets.

While discussing these works in the coming pages, it is imperative to understand some of their influences. It is also worth noting that “notable” in this sense does not necessarily mean critically acclaimed. In fact, these works are more noted for their popular legacy than they would be for their critical legacy. While the works may have drawn critical praise, they matter more for their cultural resonance. To prove the point of this essay, I will show that at least a few of the works here have a broad cultural understanding and are not just underground in their success. Also involved in this discussion is the idea that these tropes can change slightly for current audiences. These

tropes exist in mainstream culture and should be recognizable if in a slightly different form.

Let us first consider the *Harry Potter* series. Since its initial release, this series has not only been read by generations of readers but become a cultural force as well.

The first allusions present within *Harry Potter* are to the classics, meaning Greek and Roman, literature. In many ways, the character of Harry Potter recalls for us the many heroes of classic Greek epics. He is on a constant journey where he had to rely on both his wits, like Odysseus, or his power, like Achilles, to save the day and his world from an evil threat. Richard Spencer echoes G.S. Kirk,

Kirk listed the following as some of the common themes in Greek myths about heroes: tricks, riddles, ingenious solutions to dilemmas, transformations, accidental killing of a relative or lover or friend, giants, monsters (centaurs, a sphynx, satyrs), snakes, attempts to get rid of a rival by setting up impossible and dangerous tasks (Spencer 30).

Each of these tropes appears within the *Harry Potter* series at different points during the story and are essential to a New Historicist understanding of the work. Harry's entire journey is fraught with these perils, further cementing his story as echoing those of the classics. During each of Harry's trials within the series, he triumphs against one of these tests presented above. One of the first times this can be seen is in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. During the climax of the novel, Harry is forced to do battle with a basilisk, the first of many monsters he would fight over the course of the series.

The basilisk was moving toward Harry; he could hear its heavy body slithering heavily across the dusty floor. Eyes still tightly shut, Harry began to run blindly sideways, his hands outstretched, feeling his way- Voldemort was laughing- (*Chamber* 282-283).

This can also be noted during the third task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament presented in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Within the maze that serves as the task, Harry encounters a sphynx blocking his path.

It had the body of an over-large lion: great clawed paws and a long yellowish tail ending in a brown tuft. Its head, however, was that of a woman. She turned her long, almond-shaped eyes on Harry as he approached. He raised his wand, hesitating. She was not crouching as if to spring, but pacing from side to side of the path, blocking his progress (*Goblet* 576).

Harry's encounter with the sphynx is but another example of his having to overcome some monster to continue his journey. But the Tri-Ward Tournament itself speaks to another of the examples that Spencer lists. It is a series of dangerous tasks, including the maze and facing a dragon, designed to force the competitors to challenge themselves and beat their rivals. Unbeknownst to Harry, series villain Voldemort had arranged the competition to fulfill his desire to gain a physical form.

The second of these groups of allusions are the many allusions to Christianity present within *Harry Potter*. Within Christianity appears belief in a savior, blood sacrifice, and redemption. These ideas are apparent from the *Harry Potter* series as well. However, as these ideas or tropes are prevalent from multiple different sources, it is

necessary to suggest that Christianity is the source from which Rowling takes her inspiration. This becomes apparent in the discussion of immortality within the work. Multiple times throughout the series there are references made to the soul. Characters discuss that the only way to split a soul is with the mortal sin of murder.

By an act of evil- the supreme act of evil. By committing murder. Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent on creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage. He would incase the torn portion (*Half-Blood* 455).

The Horcrux is an item of value to its creator and carries a portion of its soul rendering its creator immortal.

What may be most telling from the series, however, are the various sacrifices that the characters make. Throughout the series, many characters sacrifice their lives for their loved ones or some higher ideal. Among the named characters to die this way are Lily Potter and Dumbledore. However, it may be Harry's sacrifice that is most telling of the connection to Christianity. Numerous characters throughout the series refer to Harry as the savior of the wizarding world or even the "chosen one." And much like the savior of the Christian faith, Jesus Christ, Harry sacrifices his life to stop a great evil and save the world. Ari Armstrong writes:

I do not doubt that Rowling intended to create a parallel to Christ's death in the acts of both Lily and Harry. (Dumbledore's death invites the same comparison.) (Armstrong 52).

One can surmise Harry's journey as a parallel to the story of Jesus Christ. A young man comes of age, accepts his impossible fate, and sacrifices his life for the greater good.

Afterward, this sacrifice is rewarded with a resurrection and a second life. One can note this within the last novel of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows*. When talking with Albus Dumbledore after his death, Harry is given a choice to go back, and he chooses to do so, signifying the ultimate acceptance of his destiny much in the same way that Jesus accepted his.

Harry nodded and sighed. Leaving this place would not be nearly as hard as walking into the forest had been, but it was warm and light and peaceful here, and he knew that he was heading back to pain and the fear of more loss (*Deathly Hollows* 665).

Harry understands that there is going to be more suffering, but he chooses to do so to help those in need and fulfill a prophecy that has guided the series.

The final trope for the *Harry Potter* series are the other numerous characters from the annals of literature from which this series takes inspiration. Tropes within this series and *A Song of Ice and Fire* are important because they show a connection to literature that predates their writing. As mentioned above, there are various comparisons to be made between Harry Potter and Jesus Christ, but Harry also draws inspiration from other classic figures. To illustrate this point, one may compare Harry Potter to King Arthur. Firstly, one must understand that there is no one definitive King Arthur myth. The character and his adventures have been touched upon in literature throughout the ages. Therefore, many allusions made to the King Arthur myths may be broader than expected. However, these myths do follow a general pattern of the character, allowing the reader the ability to extrapolate a theory about the character's personality and history to compare to the character of Harry Potter. Like Arthur, Harry is a prophesized figure destined to

save England in its time of need. Also like Arthur, Harry is guided by a wise and powerful wizard with seemingly endless ability yet beaten by an evil figure he helped train.

Given this literary context, the Arthurianism of the Harry Potter novels can be better understood. Without looking for a particular literary source, there is a more generic Arthurianism of sorcery, of supernatural events and supernatural creatures, by Stephens and McCallum's classification. It is this side of Arthurianism that is more likely to meet with the young readers' approbation, and it is generally linked with other children's classics we associate with Arthurian motifs (Petrina 100).

There are also specific references found within Harry's life that parallel King Arthur. One major point of focus is the Sword of Gryffindor from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

An obvious instance is the allusion to T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* we find in the episode of the Gryffindor sword, which Harry unexpectedly extracts from a magical hat in the second volume of the series: it is not so much the magical act in itself (a sword out of a hat may remind the reader, particularly if adult, more of prestidigitation than of magic), but the sudden and unpredictable nature of the event, the simplicity of the trick by which a child may get out of an impasse, together with its association with the idea of being a chosen one (Petrina 101).

The character of Dumbledore notes that the sword is capable of being wielded only by a true Gryffindor. This is one of the first notions that Harry may be some chosen figure in the battle against evil.

Dumbledore reached across to Professor McGonagall's desk, picked up the blood-stained silver sword, and handed it to Harry. Dully, Harry turned it over, the rubies blazing in the firelight. And then he saw the name engraved just below the hilt. Godric Gryffindor.

“Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the hat, Harry”
(*Chamber 296*).

Pushed throughout the series is the "chosen one" concept, from Harry surviving a spell meant to kill everything it touches to the wizarding government referring to him as the "Chosen One" near the end. It's this notion of a "chosen one" that signifies the connection between Harry and Arthur. As stated above, both are prophesized to save Britain and guided by a wise magician.

In the case of the *Harry Potter* series, the wise magician who guides the protagonist is Albus Dumbledore. Dumbledore is mentioned several times throughout the series as the single most powerful wizard alive, if not the most powerful wizard of all time. And much like Merlin, he is also a bit “off” in his characterization. Nowhere is this clearer than in Harry's first discussion of the character.

“Welcome!” he said. “Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!”
“Thank you!”

He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not.

"Is he- a bit mad?" he asked Percy uncertainly.

"Mad?" said Percy airily. "He's a genius! Best wizard in the world! But he is a bit mad, yes. Potatoes, Harry?" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 114).

For the rest of the series, Dumbledore serves as an eccentric mentor to Harry, guiding him through his journey much as Merlin guided Arthur.

The *Harry Potter* series is important to this discussion because of the numerous ways it has moved past the tenets of Postmodernism. In its tropes and themes, it has returned to ideas that have long since been abandoned by the Postmodern. It embraces the grand narrative and harkens back to the stories of King Arthur and even Jesus Christ. Concepts such as the struggle between the hero and the villain return within the Harry Potter series to be interpreted for the current generation of readers.

Rowling's works also play with the notion of the grand narrative within the pages of *Harry Potter*. While she does question some of the aspects of the grand narrative, her work does propose the age-old theory that good triumphs over evil. Harry Potter as a character has his faults, yes, but he is a good person fighting for good causes. Lord Voldemort may be persuasive, but he is an evil person fighting for evil causes. In this way, Rowling reinforces one grand narrative about which Postmodern theorists remain skeptical.

The importance of this series stretches beyond what the stories have brought back to the literary discussion. In the wake of the *Harry Potter* series were a plethora of other young adult-oriented novels that have similar themes and ideas. These young adult series

have returned in earnest to ideas that were popular long before the Postmodern movement. The success of these series assures us that authors will continue to probe past literature for new uses of tropes.

New Historicism is an attempt to analyze the culture and society of a work through the reading of the work itself. It analyzes such features as influences on the author to grasp the meaning of the work itself. It also looks at the broader world around the work. Postmodernists may analyze a work as an individual piece of literature with its own individual meaning and form, which is perfectly valid, but it may not reflect some key cultural trends or theories, as would a New Historicist view of the work. For example, New Historicism does not tend to see works as entirely individual and unique artifacts. As mentioned earlier, there is merit to the consideration of cultural mobility and the sharing of ideas between works and authors. It thus becomes more plausible to see any incoming or continuing trends within popular literature that other forms of Postmodernism would ignore as inconsequential. If one wishes to view these two series as portents of the greater changes in the world of literature, New Historicism may be the better theory from which to glean that information. Young Adult fiction has the best view of this trend since *Harry Potter* was released. Clare Fallon of the *The Huffington Post* notes:

“When ‘HP’ first hit [the U.S.] in ’98, it certainly made an impact,” said Glassman. In his iconic children’s store, Books of Wonder, he noticed that “people were looking for books like that, because there was nothing else ... we were selling a lot of Lloyd Alexander, E. Nesbit, obviously the “Narnia” books, *The Hobbit*, L.M. Boston.” Meanwhile, the publishing

industry's gears were turning. It takes a couple of years, Glassman pointed out, to jump on a new, unexpected publishing trend. Editors and agents have to find people writing similar books, acquire them, edit them and publish them, none of which can be accomplished overnight (Fallon).

Eventually, though, it wasn't just classics that were benefiting from the "Potter" mania. New authors were getting opportunities, too. Over the ensuing years, the sheer number of books published for kids seems to have ballooned; in 2011, *The Atlantic* reported that the number of YA books had increased by a factor of 10 between 1997 and 2009. Those precise numbers have been disputed, but it's not the only statistic. Year after year, annual sales statistics show that rising demand for children's books is bolstering the entire publishing industry. Rowling's series not only revived interest in classic works of fantasy, but left readers clamoring for new fantasy worlds that they could explore.

Rowling's work is also a product of the time. England in the 1990s was a period of change in both the sociopolitical and sociocultural spheres of influence. The people wanted diversity and change. They wanted something beyond the traditional norms of British culture. Primarily, the British were searching for an identity as they entered the new millennium that differed from the previous era. Alwyn W. Turner, a cultural and political historian based in London, explains this desire further in his work *A Classless Society: Britain in the 1990s*:

The search for identity, for a shared set of values, was largely prompted by the supposed Thatcherite repudiation of society, but was made more acute by the growing influence of the European Union and by the looming inevitability of devolution within the United Kingdom. The political shape

of the nation was being redefined, and with that came a need to redefine what constituted Britishness (Turner 8).

This redefinition of “Britishness” came with a desire for added diversity within the country. This diversity was welcomed as bringing new ideas to the concept of being British in the current era. Leaders in England saw this change and adapted policies to fit these ideals.

Rather it was the outcome of two political forces born in the 1960s that reached maturity in the 1980s: first, the anti-establishment tendencies embodied in Thatcherism, and second, the liberalising identity politics that were particularly associated with Ken Livingstone and what had once been known as the “loony left”. Between them, they brought into being a new Britain, characterized by a tolerance for diversity and a democratisation in social and cultural - if not political - arenas (Turner 6).

This battle between these new ideas and the past plays out in the pages of *Harry Potter* as well. Many of the foes Harry faces are not the evil Death Eaters, but representatives of a government that wants nothing more than to preserve the status quo and bury its head in the sand when it comes to the looming second war with Voldemort. This is best seen in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, wherein the Ministry of Magic is so fearful of the words of Harry and Albus Dumbledore that they attempt to interfere with the schooling of the children at Hogwarts. Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, Delores Umbridge, a Ministry appointment, states the Ministry’s position in her remarks at a welcome-back feast. “There, again, progress for progress’ sake must be discouraged, for our tried and true tested traditions often require no tinkering” (*Order* 213). Umbridge

represents the traditional Ministry approach, and therefore the traditional English viewpoints, against more progressive Harry and the view of the younger generation. This divergence of opinion and belief is the center of the change within the British nation. Unlike America, however, this change was not focused so much on gloom or despair, like the grunge era, but on happiness that England could change for the better, best summed up by Michael Deacon writing for *The Telegraph*:

But the Nineties were a great time for British culture – or so they felt to me, as a teenager living through them. I swallowed Britpop whole. I had Alex from Blur’s hair. I wore Liam Gallagher’s blue Adidas coat. I went to a party as Justine from Elastica – leather jacket, eyeliner and all.

People who weren’t young at the time sniff that Nineties culture was all rip-offs and recycling; it wasn’t new. But they forget: when you’re young, everything’s new. And even looking back today, I still see the Nineties as a fusion of almost everything great that had happened in British culture in the preceding 40 years. (Deacon).

Even though *Harry Potter* gets dark at times, even though the characters may feel depressed, there is always a glimmer of hope within the text. And there is always the thought that Harry will succeed in the end. This is an argument in favor of New Historicist theory over Postmodern theory. While Postmodern theory may provide an analysis of the words Rowling uses or the societal cues she wishes to discuss, it cannot account for the culture. But New Historicism strives to understand the culture of the time by analyzing the literature. And the reader can gather, much like Michael Deacon says,

the hope and excitement of a new age in British society through the pages of the Harry Potter books.

Chapter Five: Analysis of *A Song of Ice and Fire* Series

Reflecting upon and alluding to past works is not only within the domain of young adult literature. Contemporary adult literature is flush with novels that use similar allusions as well. One of these series of novels is George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Through a series of novels, Martin has created the faux-medieval world of Westeros where many wealthy and influential families fight to gain control of the Iron Throne and the seven kingdoms it rules. Meanwhile, the threat of a malevolent force of undead creatures in the North bears down on them all.

The stylized medieval world that Martin creates alludes to many forms of medieval literature, including the *chanson de gestes*, or song of heroic deeds, and the chivalric romance. Many characters within the world Martin creates would not be out of place in the medieval stories from which he takes inspiration. In practice, the *chanson de gestes* were poems told by bards in the courts of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious that dealt with tales of military heroism or grand feats by knights. Over time, these stories began to involve tales of urban life and even fantasy. Martin's story in its broadest plot is like the plots of the *chanson de gestes*. In an interview with the *Indiana Daily Student*, the student newspaper for Indiana University, Professor Rosemarie McGerr, director of the Medieval Studies Institute, is quoted as saying the following:

What we think of as popular story structure now has a lot in common with basic story structure in medieval literature because they both reflect folktale patterns: a young hero — often with a secret past — faces a problem that endangers his future, so he travels in search of a solution and gains knowledge/powers/friends that help him overcome his opponents

and win new identity and family or return home with security. Adventure stories in ancient and medieval literature that have supernatural elements have parallels with modern fantasy narratives.

In a general sense, *A Song of Ice and Fire* features all these criteria. Indeed, many of the characters in the series are on some journey to make their lives better. Brantley Bryant, in an interview with *PBS*, agrees with Professor McGerr.

According to Brantley Bryant, an associate professor of medieval literature at Sonoma State University, George R.R. Martin, the author of the fantasy series that inspired the HBO show, “has read deeply into medieval history.”

“Sometimes people who haven’t had a chance to read a lot of medieval literature have this idea that it’s a kind of fairy tale world, that medieval literature is this kind of thing where everyone is always very chaste and everyone is very pure and nice,” said Bryant, who specializes in Chaucer. “Some of the most sensational, violent aspects of ‘Game of Thrones’ are actually also present in medieval literature.”

Both professors maintain that, even if Martin does not have a direct source to draw from in specific medieval literary sources, then he is at least knowledgeable about the medieval world and its literature. This is important because many of the characters within Martin's series reflect or seem to draw upon certain characters within medieval literature when looked at in a comparison of their stories. A Postmodern interpretation of these works would ignore this connection to medieval literature. By using a New Historicist approach, the critic can explore this connection and understand a deeper level of the work itself.

The arching narrative of *A Song of Ice and Fire* deals with a series of wars to conquer the Iron Throne. Each of the major families within the work has at least one agent trying to gain some semblance of control over the throne and many of the protagonists of the series are directly involved in the conflict. The subjects of these stories, for example *The Song of Roland*, are directly comparable to three characters in the series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. These three characters are Jaime Lannister, Jon Snow, and Robb Stark. For this comparison, one only needs to look through the plot of *The Song of Roland*. Jaime Lannister, Jon Snow, and Robb Stark all have much in common with Roland, the archetypal French knight, if changed to fit Martin's bleak world. He is smart, commanding, and inspiring. He is also an outstanding soldier, losing only to circumstances beyond his control. The author describes Roland as follows:

Grandonie was a valiant and worthy knight,
Exceptionally strong, and a brave warrior,
Now he has found Roland in his path.
Never having seen him, he still recognized him
From his fierce expression and fine physique,
From his noble countenance and bearing.

He cannot help but be terrified of Roland (*Song of Roland* 54).

In this way, he is comparable to both Jaime Lannister, Robb Stark, and Jon Snow, three characters in Martin's work best known for their martial abilities. In his own musings, Jon Snow similarly describes Jaime Lannister as Roland during the first book in the series, *A Game of Thrones*.

Ser Jaime Lannister was twin to Queen Cersei; tall and golden, with flashing green eyes and a smile that cut like a knife. He wore crimson silk, high black boots, a black satin cloak. On the breast of his tunic, the lion of his House was embroidered in gold thread, roaring its defiance. They called him the Lion of Lannister to his face and whispered “Kingslayer” behind his back. Jon found it hard to look away from him. This is what a king should look like, he thought to himself as the man passed (Martin 62).

However, it is not only in looks that Jaime is comparable to Roland. During a latter battle in the same novel, the following is for the respect of Jaime’s martial prowess.

Jaime slid the golden sword into its sheath.

So I suppose I’ll let you run back to Robert to tell him how I frightened you. I wonder if he’ll care.” Jaime pushed his wet hair back with his fingers and wheeled his horse around. When he was beyond the line of swordsmen, he glanced back at his captain. “Tregar, see that no harm comes to Lord Stark (394).

Jaime's abilities with a blade earn him a level of respect on par with the highest lords within the work. Throughout the series, characters appreciate Jaime's highlighted skills with a sword even after the loss of his hand.

In a similar manner to how characters remark about Jaime, Jon gains praise for his fighting abilities as well. Once he reaches the Night's Watch, Jon's abilities with a sword allow him to overcome his bastard birth and gain the respect of his comrades-in-arms.

When he raised his sword, Jon went underneath it with a sweeping blow that crunched against the back of the other boy's leg and sent him staggering. Grenn's downcut was answered by an overhand that dented his helm. (187-88).

Due to Jon's reputation with the sword, he quickly establishes himself as the leader of the recruits and a voice amongst the younger generation of the Night's Watch.

Jon's half-brother Robb is also described using his military abilities and noble countenance. Throughout his plot within the novels, Robb is a brilliant military commander, at a young age, who can win battle after battle. His defeat comes at the betrayal of an ally, not his own shortcomings.

Robb came back to her on a different horse, riding a piebald gelding in the place of the grey stallion he had taken down into the valley. The wolf's head on his shield was slashed half to pieces, raw wood showing where deep gouges had been hacked in the oak, but Robb himself seemed unhurt. Yet when he came closer, Catelyn saw that his mailed glove and the sleeve of his surcoat were black with blood. "You're hurt," she said. Robb lifted his hand, opened and closed his fingers. "No," he said. "Torrhen's blood, perhaps, or ..." He shook his head. "I do not know" (711-712).

All three of these characters echo the bravery and military ability shown by Roland throughout his own adventure. And it is in this echoing that Martin alludes to the *chanson de geste* as a genre. One of the purposes of the *chanson de geste* is to highlight the military dominance of the court of Charlemagne. These stories focused on military

history and the grandeur of the knights of the French courts. In alluding to this genre, Martin presents characters known throughout his world for their military prominence.

Even the characters without a military pedigree, or who have long since retired from active fighting, draw comparisons with the character of Roland. One notable example of this is Ned Stark. Like Roland, Ned puts his trust within a supposed ally and it ends up costing him his life.

Whether me or another, unless it's in your interests.

Since King Marsilie has sent you the message

That he'll be your vassal, placing his hands together,

And will hold the whole of Spain for you as a fief,

And will then adopt the faith that we observe,

Anyone who advises you to reject this treaty

Does not care, my lord, what kind of death we suffer (*Song of Roland*, 8).

This quote is from Ganelon, advising King Charlemagne to go against the wishes of Roland. It is because of this that Roland agrees to the journey he undertakes during the story. However, it is also because of this disagreement that Ganelon chooses to betray Roland and the French to their enemies, leading to Roland's death.

Like Roland, Ned faces a similar struggle throughout the first book of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Ned chooses to place his trust in Petyr Baelish, known as Littlefinger. However, Littlefinger is in love with Ned's wife and betrays Ned to the Lannisters out of spite.

Ned's shout came far too late. Janos Slynt himself slashed open Varly's throat. Cayn whirled, steel flashing, drove back the nearest spearman with

a flurry of blows; for an instant it looked as though he might cut his way free. Then the Hound was on him. Sandor Clegane's first cut took off Cayn's sword hand at the wrist; his second drove him to his knees and opened him from shoulder to breastbone. As his men died around him, Littlefinger slid Ned's dagger from its sheath and shoved it up under his chin. His smile was apologetic. "I did warn you not to trust me, you know." (Martin 539).

The rest of Ned's story sees him rot in a cell and then put to death by the new king, Joffrey. Though the circumstances of their deaths are different, both Ned and Roland decide to put their trust in an ally who chooses to betray them. In this way, Martin is again alluding to the most famous of the *chansons de gestes*.

A Song of Ice and Fire also makes use of the conventions that define the medieval or chivalric romance. This is a connection that would be ignored by the Postmodern theorist, but embraced by a New Historicist theorist. Multiple characters within Martin's work allude to the basic premise of a knight willing to sacrifice himself and his honor for the queen, or noblewoman, he loves though there is often no hope of her returning his feelings. This premise is the core idea behind the term courtly love, itself a defining characteristic of chivalric romance.

The conventions of courtly love are that a knight of noble blood would adore and worship a young noble-woman from afar, seeking to protect her honor and win her favor by valorous deeds. He typically falls ill with love-sickness, while the woman chastely or scornfully rejects or refuses his advances in public (Wheeler 1).

The idea of courtly love exists in the relationships between many characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

One of the most notable of these relationships is between Ser Jorah Mormont and his liege, Daenerys Targaryen. Through his time by her side, Jorah develops feelings for the young queen he serves, comparing her beauty to the wife who left him. During this time, during a particularly difficult journey for Daenerys, he risks his life multiple times to defend her. He does this despite her marriage and her refusal to forget her husband's memory when he dies.

Dany shivered, and pulled the lionskin tight about her. She looked like me. It explained much that she had not truly understood. He wants me, she realized. He loves me as he loved her, not as a knight loves his queen but as a man loves a woman. She tried to imagine herself in Ser Jorah's arms, kissing him, pleasuring him, letting him enter her. It was no good. When she closed her eyes, his face kept changing into Drogo's (Martin 194).

Despite their realization that she will never love him as he loves her, Jorah continues to be one of her most faithful knights willing to go to any length to protect and defend her.

In an interesting gender variant of the same trope, Brienne of Tarth becomes a knight with the sole purpose of protecting her king, Renly Baratheon, for he had been kind to her. In a similar fashion to Jorah, she is infatuated with her liege as well. However, it is an open secret amongst the characters of the series that Renly is homosexual, though married for political reasons to a woman. Despite this knowledge, Brienne devotes herself to Renly by joining his kingsguard to protect him better.

And yet, when Renly cut away her torn cloak and fastened a rainbow in its place, Brienne of Tarth did not look unfortunate. Her smile lit up her face, and her voice was strong and proud as she said, “My life for yours, Your Grace. From this day on, I am your shield, I swear it by the old gods and the new.” The way she looked at the king—looked down at him, she was a good hand higher, though Renly was near as tall as his brother had been—was painful to see (323).

After the murder of Renly, Brienne takes it upon herself to hunt down his killer and slay him by her own hand; such is her devotion to her king. “It made sense enough for Brienne. “I will kill him,” the tall homely girl declared. “With my lord’s own sword, I will kill him. I swear it. I swear it. I swear it” (467).

Entrenched as *A Song of Ice and Fire* is within the genres of the medieval world, many characters are motivated in their actions with ideals found within chivalric romances. Dr. Charles Hackney of the University of Regina explains this in further detail:

Direct comparisons between actual historical eras and Westeros should be handled with a light touch. One strong connection between the Seven Kingdoms and the medieval Europe of the real world, however, involves Martin’s use of chivalry. Chivalry is presented in the novels as a clash between high idealism and grim reality (Hackney 142-143).

While it is true that Martin used multiple sources of inspiration for his work, and no definitive greater example exists, Hackney confirms that Martin used the chivalric traditions of medieval European society in the creation of Westeros. But it was not only in chivalry that Martin looks back to medieval society. Martin addresses also the more

fantastic elements present in medieval storytelling, such as dragons and other mythological beasts. Martin also couples these traditions with elements of the fantasy worlds of the modern era. Dragons and other mythical creatures, such as the dangerous Others, are present threats to the human characters, but the biggest threat may be humanity itself.

For both series, the authors were explicit in their use of tropes and ideas dating back to the beginnings of western literature. Both the *Harry Potter* series and *A Song of Ice and Fire* are sprawling narratives in which the heroes must overcome terrible peril to prevail. In scope alone, these series embrace this. Because of these tropes and ideas, neither *Harry Potter* nor *A Song of Ice and Fire* is ideally suited to be analyzed just by understanding the basic principles of the Postmodern era. However, both series can be read more thoroughly through a New Historicist reading of the text.

Martin's success has led to numerous other authors adopting his more grim and realistic approach to high fantasy, instead of the version presented in earlier works of the same genre. Explaining this phenomenon further is David Orr, writing for *The New York Times*:

If he succeeds, he will have fulfilled one of the highest functions of this rich genre. Because fantasy of any kind tells us that the world we know is not the only one, nor the most enduring — and that truth can be anything but an escape or a comfort. “You must change your life,” Rilke said. But fantasy’s commandment can be more subtle: “Your life is not your life, not entirely, not forever.” Looked at one way, that message can seem naïve, even childish. Looked at another, however, it has a dark side, which

reminds us why fantasy is so often shelved beside not romance but horror (Orr, Aug, 2011).

Not only does Orr note the success of Martin's novels, but he also notes how they can change the genre. If so, it is entirely reasonable to postulate that if both Rowling and Martin continue their success, they may, in fact, stumble upon one of the goals of the Postmodern era itself: to bring together the worlds of high art and popular culture. But this understanding of these works comes only by understanding the world, a study pre-eminently suited for New Historicism.

A New Historicist theorist may notice this trend, because of the study of the culture surrounding the work, while another Postmodernist may not. Again, this is a paper discussing popular literature. By its very definition, popular literature needs to have an impact on the larger cultural landscape. While it may not be the only way to notice its effect, a study of the culture surrounding these works would provide a clear picture as to their impact on society wholly.

Martin's works are bleak, but the world of America that Martin inhabits is dark as well. *A Song of Ice and Fire* first hit shelves with *A Game of Thrones* in 1996. Since this time, America has seen numerous political and social upheavals that have left the country bitter and divided on numerous important issues. One only needs to look as far as the fractured political climate within the country to understand this point. Dick Meyer, Chief Washington Correspondent for the Scripps Washington Bureau and former Executive Editor for National Public Radio, underscores the fractured state of America in his work *Why We Hate Us: American Discontent in the New Millennium*:

The trust and confidence Americans have in the country's major institutions and leaders have been at historic lows since the early 1970s and are staying low in the first decade of the twenty-first century. We are disillusioned and repelled by the polluted social and cultural environment we live in. We perceive it as toxic, and we are wary. The values we have as families and individuals aren't reflected in the collective culture. This threatens our individual happiness and our collective ability to get things done in politics and in communities (10).

Americans are disillusioned with society, religion, culture, and the general state of the country. They no longer find hope or faith within established institutions. Is it any wonder that *A Song of Ice and Fire* echoes this fractured and bleak worldview? A New Historicist perspective on the work suggests theory that the culture permeating America during the time that Martin has been writing has influenced his work. Fears presented in *A Song of Ice and Fire* such as a stranger invading, loss of prestige, money and wealth making capacity, are all fears present within the current American cultural climate. Presented as well are some of the more positive aspects of American culture. Young leaders attempting the impossible and the Romantic notion of striving for success even in the face of astronomical odds are fixtures of American idealism, just as they are present in the text. These clues to the culture that may have shaped Martin's writing cannot be found just by analyzing the work for an unreliable narrator or paradox in sentence structure or ideas. And, yes, it is important to understand that even if these Postmodern principles exist within the text, they often do not account for the outside influences on the writer that may end up shaping the work to match the current culture. Because of this

fact, Postmodernism will always fall short of providing a complete analysis of a literary work.

Chapter Six: Analysis of Song Lyrics

To understand the parameters of this chapter, one must first understand the definition of popular music. Tara Brabazon, professor of Cultural Studies at Flinders University, provides for us a definition from which I can gather sources for this discussion:

Supposedly, popular music is not classical music or folk music. Actually, the boundaries between different forms and modes of music are permeable. Instead, it is more appropriate and useful for scholars to ignore the loaded labels of genres and explore popular music through its audiences. Inspired by the disciplines of sociology and psychology, popular music becomes part of the shared experiences of a group or community, offering pleasure, resistance and narratives of love, romance, sex, masculinity, femininity and desire. A further definition that is increasingly relevant explores the relationship between popular music and its modes of dissemination through diverse – but digitally convergent – technological platforms. Popular music refers to the sonic content that is migrated between the analogue and digital, vinyl and MP3(9).

With this definition in mind, I can extrapolate a meaning of popular music for the rest of this discussion. Popular music is music enjoyed by the masses and achieves some success, whether that be artistic or commercial. This does not mean that popular music must be commercially successful, but must be a form of music readily consumed in mass quantity. For this discussion, however, I will be focusing on musicians who have achieved both critical and commercial success. Name recognition and a familiarity with

the pieces will make this point easier to understand. It is important for the readers to note that this section of the paper will deal specifically with song lyrics, and not the accompanying musical compositions.

As mentioned in Chapter Two of this thesis, the Postmodern era considers literature to be narrative, rejecting in this assertion poetry itself. Therefore, most Postmodern theory deals with only literature espousing some narrative within the text. In this way, the reader can see the first way in which popular music distances itself from Postmodern theory. There is a large emphasis placed on lyrics in popular music. Though not all popular music has a lyrical component, it is a reasonable assertion that when listening to popular music one may indeed hear lyrics. It now becomes the task of this thesis to make another important claim: lyrics should be considered poetry.

It was Aristotle who categorized poetry into three broad types: lyric, epic, and dramatic. And in his definition, lyric poetry was meant to be accompanied by a lyre and have a musical quality. This quality of particular poems has permeated through time and found a home of sorts in popular music. One such example of this would be the song "Return of the Grievous Angel" by country artist Gram Parsons. The lyrics of the song were originally in poem form, penned by Tom Brown with the sole intent of Gram Parsons turning the poem into a song. Bryan Thomas, writing for visual-arts magazine *Night Flight*, explains the story of how this interaction transpired:

Brown says that Martin handed Parsons the sheet of lyrics he'd written, asking him to please consider setting it to music and that if Parsons wanted to chat with the writer about the song, Brown would be over at the bar, talking with Emmylou Harris. Brown says that Parsons was fighting

with Gretchen at the time. Brown told me that Parsons changed the word “roughnecks” to “kickers,” and added the two bridge lines (Thomas).

What the reader should understand from this anecdote is the ease with which Parsons was able to translate Brown's poem into a song, merely changing one word and adding a bridge. And this is not an isolated account. Throughout popular music, many musicians have used pre-written poetry and verse to provide lyrics for the songs they are performing, such as Pete Seeger and, later, The Byrds using verses from the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes for the lyrics to “*Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is A Season)*).

Allowing for the idea that lyrics should be considered poetry is essential for this thesis. Popular music is considered by some to be lesser or lower than other forms of music, but there is a poetic quality to the lyrics in these pieces that allows for a critical discussion and, more importantly, a critical reading of the lyrics. Because of their poetic nature, song lyrics can be analyzed in the same way as any other piece of literature. This allows me to explain why New Historicism is better suited for their analysis.

Although it derives from Postmodern theory, New Historicism allows for the study and understanding of poetry and verse. In his earliest work defined as New Historicism, as mentioned above, Stephen Greenblatt worked with both Shakespearean drama and poetry, usually in the form of a sonnet.

One only needs to look at examples of popular music to understand how a New Historicism view of song lyrics can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the literature itself than provided by a Postmodern reading. Historian Mitchell K. Hall writes,

Twentieth-century American folk music often dealt with social issues like labor unions and civil rights, but like blues and country music, folk music only occasionally crossed over to pop audiences. The virulent anticommunism of the early Cold War years had significantly inhibited the music's dissenting role (121).

However, as the younger generation began to become the dominant force in popular culture, these folk artists became more prominent and their opinion more relevant outside traditional folk circles. One such example would be the music of Bob Dylan. Since the beginning of his career, Dylan has been considered everything from an underground darling to a father of folk-rock. At the beginning of his career, Bob Dylan was part of an emerging folk scene that often focused on societal ills and the changing cultural landscape.

The line, it is drawn, the curse, it is cast

The slow one now will later be fast

The present now will later be past

The order is rapidly fadin'

And the first one now will later be last

For the times they are a-changin' (The Times They Are A-Changin').

And while there are Postmodern ideas within "The Times They Are A-Changin'", the idea of the order of the world giving way to new ideas being at the forefront, explicitly references the culture in which Bob Dylan is writing. With this sort of piece, it becomes impossible to separate the lyrics from the culture of the time.

John Lennon, too, seemed to find himself writing about the culture that surrounded him.

John Lennon challenged the notion that protest music was simply a fad. During a 1964 interview, when asked if the Beatles planned on recording any antiwar songs, Lennon responded, “All our songs are antiwar.” (Hall 130).

Indeed, as his career continued, Lennon's works emerge as burgeoning anthems in the anti-war movement of the late 60s and early 70s.

Ev'rybody's talking 'bout
John and Yoko, Timmy Leary, Rosemary, Tommy Smothers, Bobby
Dylan, Tommy Cooper, Derek Taylor, Norman Mailer, Alan Ginsberg,
Hare Krishna, Hare, Hare Krishna
All we are saying is give peace a chance
All we are saying is give peace a chance (“Give Peace A Chance”).

Not only is this song a list of some of the most influential pop culture figures of the day, but also a cry for an end to the Vietnam War. Both this piece and Dylan's above can be enjoyed, and even analyzed, without their larger cultural significance. But without this cultural significance, the message does not have the same power. Their messages became intertwined with the anti-war movement. Their fans were diversified, of different backgrounds, but unified in their opposition to the Vietnam War. Professor of History Kenneth Heineman, in his work *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American State Universities in the Vietnam Era*, notes:

Contrary to contemporary stereotypes, students who became involved in anti-Vietnam War protest were not all middle class. One reason that the stereotype of the affluent student antiwar activists arose was because of the great news media attention which privileged, secularized Protestant and Jewish, radical youths received (98-99).

The clash of culture became a battle between the diversified American youth and their older counterparts. What would be considered typical American culture, trusting that the war was justified and that the intentions of the government were pure, also addressed the war in Vietnam. This is most notable in Sgt. Barry Sadler's message of military positivity, "The Ballad Of The Green Berets":

Silver wings upon their chest

These are men, America's best

One hundred men will test today

But only three win the Green Beret ("The Ballad Of The Green Beret").

These songs present opposing views to the same cultural milestone that affected society. But it is not merely songs dealing with large-scale conflict, or the changing nature of time, linked to the culture of the era. Songs have also been used to express opinion on famous cultural figures of the day, such as Elton John's "Candle in the Wind" which was written to commemorate Marilyn Monroe.

Goodbye Norma Jean

Though I never knew you at all

You had the grace to hold yourself

While those around you crawled

Goodbye Norma Jean

From the young man in the twenty second row

Who sees you as something as more than sexual

More than just our Marilyn Monroe (“Candle In The Wind”).

Or Ozzy Osborn’s “Mr. Crowley”, written about British occultist Aleister Crowley.

Mr. Crowley, what went on in your head?

Oh, Mr. Crowley, did you talk to the dead?

Your life style to me seemed so tragic

With the thrill of it all

You fooled all the people with magic

Yeah, you waited on Satan's call (“Mr. Crowley”).

Even through an analysis of their critical merit, both songs lose meaning without the cultural context behind the works.

Finally, even when using specific Postmodern methods of writing, the cultural context of the song is needed for the points to be understood to their fullest effect. For an example of this theory, one needs to look at the song “Back in the U.S.S.R.” by The Beatles. The song opens their 1968 album, *The Beatles*, and is a parody of an earlier Beach Boys song, “California Girls”. “California Girls” contains within it a listing of the various types of girls found within the United States and how none of them compare to the girls found in California.

Well East coast girls are hip

I really dig those styles they wear

And the Southern girls with the way they talk

They knock me out when I'm down there
The Mid-West farmer's daughters really make you feel alright
And the Northern girls with the way they kiss
They keep their boyfriends warm at night (“California Girls”).

The Beatles respond to this song with lyrics detailing the various girls found within the Soviet Union.

Well the Ukraine girls really knock me out
They leave the West behind
And Moscow girls make me sing and shout
That Georgia's always on my my my my my my my my mind (“Back in the USSR”).

Even though the parody is evident, the song works in the context of understanding the complex relationship between the West and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Lost are the song's absurdity and humor without the knowledge of the complex political climate.

With the tools presented by said theory, a critic can come forward with a complex and deeper understanding of the songs that I have presented. This is where New Historicism makes for a better theory to understand these lyrics. If one wants an understanding of certain people or places or events mentioned within the lyrics of a song, then one needs to understand the culture surrounding that song.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

To reiterate, literary criticism is not a science. There is no definitive correct belief as to which form of criticism to use when analyzing any piece of literature. However, I do believe that certain types of criticism are better for certain types of literature. For example, one should analyze a Romantic poem by using Romantic literary criticism. When one is analyzing popular culture, as I have done during this thesis, New Historicism is one of the better forms of criticism from which to approach the analysis. I believe for certain that it is a better approach than Postmodernism. This is due in large part to the simple fact that Postmodernism ignores the cultural context of the work. This theory may not hold true for every work of literature. But, for those works that become part of the cultural zeitgeist, it becomes imperative that one understands the culture surrounding the work. Without this understanding, the reasons for the popularity of certain works become unclear even if one criticizes the work through every form of literary criticism they know.

For the most complete assessment of any literary work an approach that features two or more forms of literary criticism may be the best answer. In this way, the critic can be sure they are able to approach the work from every possible angle. However, this paper is not an attempt to describe the most complete way in which to criticize a work of popular culture. It is, again, an analysis of two forms of criticism and which I believe is better suited for this task.

When first proposed by Stephen Greenblatt, the purpose of New Historicism was to analyze past cultures. Essentially, by reading the literature of the era, one could understand the era better than by reading a textbook. I believe this theory can extend to

the current era or time as well, as I analyzed above in my literary analysis. I believe that when applied correctly, New Historicism can be used by any number of disciplines to better understand the current culture and the current trends in society, because it analyzes history and culture and their influence on the writer.

The focus of this paper was not to provide an argument against Postmodern literary theory. For its purposes, Postmodernism provides an excellent and detailed analysis of a piece of literature. The purpose of this paper was to provide a comparison between Postmodernism and New Historicism as they relate to popular culture. In that regard, Postmodernism does not provide the details needed to analyze popular culture to gather the most information from the work. Postmodernism does not provide for the critic the ability to look at the cultural context of the work nor does it focus on the inspirations for the work. These properties are essential to understand the entirety of the work.

The thesis details certain key tropes, allusions, and literary devices present within the works analyzed that cannot be rectified with a Postmodern literary interpretation. In that sense, the paper provides a New Historicist reading, while showing that fundamental portions of these works are not compatible with the Postmodern view.

It should be noted, as it was above, that New Historicism does not simply engage with a literary source but also with its cultural sources of implications. I believe this distinction is important for this discussion because of the cultural angle of the discipline. Traditional literary criticism would focus only on the formal literary aspects of the work, but a cultural critique would account for the world surrounding the work. This is the most important distinction in this paper. The difference between a scholarly work of literature and a popular work of literature is its impact on the culture. This difference is the reason

to use a cultural critique. Understanding popular literature is as much about understanding the work as it is about understanding why the work became culturally relevant. Among the multitude of literary works released every year, only a few become popular. And among those few, only a few are relevant to the culture in which they were written. If one wants to understand why this happens, a cultural critique is necessary. Those answers would not be found in a formal or traditional literary critique.

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