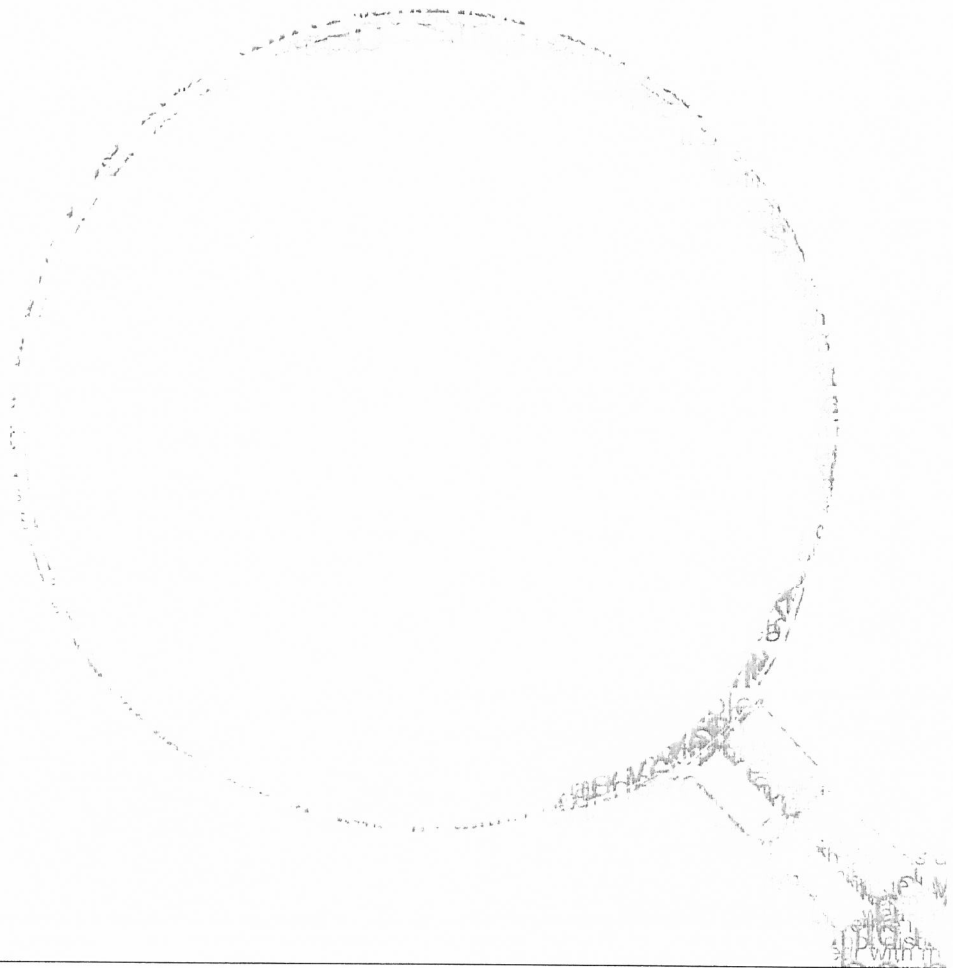
Section 4

Post-colonial ways of reading



Section 4

Post-colonial ways of reading

In this section you will see writers considering the idea that the established literature of Europe and North America has traditionally ignored or marginalised the experiences of non-Western peoples and cultures, seeing them as "other", "different" and invariably "lesser". To many readers such texts are, either consciously or unconsciously, racist. Some writers here focus on the perspectives of those affected by colonisation or imperialism, either because they have experienced it themselves or via studying literature that describes it or is a product of it. Post-colonial critics, like Marxist and feminist critics, are interested in issues of power, dominance and control and also in freedom and empowerment. They too are keen to explore how different groups of people are represented in literary texts, whose voices are heard and what attitudes and values the texts seem to embody and support. Writers taking this theoretical position also focus on the complex relationships between the colonisers and the colonised and on the language that is used to represent these relationships.

4.1 An Introduction to Post-colonialism, Post-colonial Theory and Post-colonial literature

Taken from *An Introduction to Post-colonialism, Post-colonial Theory and Post-colonial Literature,* by C. J. Ruffner Grieneisen:

Where does it come from?

Post-colonial literature comes from Britain's former colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and India. Many post-colonial writers write in English and focus on common themes such as the struggle for independence, emigration, national identity, allegiance and childhood.

What is Post-colonial Theory?

Post-colonial Theory is a literary theory or critical approach that deals with literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their people as its subject matter. The theory is based around concepts of otherness and resistance.

Post-colonial Theory became part of the critical toolbox in the 1970s, and many practitioners credit Edward Said's book *Orientalism* as being the founding work. Typically, the proponents of the theory examine the ways in which writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonizers. They also examine ways in which the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of images of the colonized as inferior. However, attempts at coming up with a single definition of post-colonial theory have proved controversial, and some writers have strongly critiqued the whole concept.

Ruffner Grieneisen, C. J. (2008) 'An Introduction to Post-Colonialism, Post-colonial Theory and Post-colonial Literature', State College of Florida [online], available:

http://faculty.scf.edu/ruffnec/2022/An%20Introduction%20to%20Postcolonialism.pdf

4.2 What Post-colonial critics do & Post-colonial criticism: an example

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry:

What post-colonial critics do:

1. They reject the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and seek to show its limitations of outlook, especially its general inability to empathise across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference;
2. They examine the representation of other cultures in literature as a way of achieving this end;
3. They show how such literature is often evasively and crucially silent on matters concerned with colonisation and imperialism (see, for instance, the discussion of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* in the example described below);
4. They foreground questions of cultural difference and diversity and examine their treatment in relevant literary works;
5. They celebrate hybridity and 'cultural polyvalency', that is, the situation whereby individuals and groups belong simultaneously to more than one culture (for instance, that of the coloniser, through a colonial school system, and that of the colonised, through local and oral traditions);
6. They develop a perspective, not just applicable to post-colonial literatures, whereby states of marginality, plurality and perceived 'Otherness' are seen as sources of energy and potential change.

Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory,* 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 198–200.

4.3 Post-colonial criticism: an example

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry:

Let us take the essay by Edward Said on Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, an essay rapidly achieving something of a definitive status and available in Mulhern's *Contemporary Marxist Criticism*, in Newton's *Theory into Practice*, in Eagleton's *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives* and Said's own *Culture and Imperialism.* Under the title 'Jane Austen and the Empire' Said carefully 'foregrounds the background' of Austen's novel, which is the estate in Antigua which Sir Thomas Bertram owns, and through which the estate of Mansfield Park is maintained. The central irony, then, is that the estate in England which represents an ideal of order and civilisation is sustained by another estate a world away, so that Mansfield Park would 'not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar and the colonial planter class'

(Mulhern) for as Said remarks, 'Sir Thomas's property in the Caribbean would have had to be a sugar plantation maintained by slave labour (not abolished until the 1830s)'. Said thus makes central the 'moral geography' of the novel, and sees Austen as the start of a line in fiction which leads to Conrad and Kipling in which the processes of colonialisation are examined. As Mulhern puts in his introductory note, the consequence is that the 'dating of British culture's imperial phase must be revised backwards from the beginning of formal Empire into the eighteenth century'. Thus, Sir Thomas, returning home and rapidly re-establishing order, without ever the thought that his views and instincts could be narrow or mistaken, is the quintessential colonialising figure who takes himself as the norm of civilisation. He is, says Said, 'a Crusoe setting things in order'. Nothing prevents our assuming, he says, that he 'does exactly the same things – on a larger scale – in Antigua ... to hold and rule Mansfield Park is to hold and rule an imperial estate in association with it'.

This reading involves 'concretising' a dimension of the novel which is largely left implicit: it involves not necessarily arguing that all these things are 'there' in the novel but that this is the right way to read it. All the same, Said insists, precisely, that these things *are* there: 'all these things having to do with the outside brought in, seem to me unmistakably *there* in the suggestiveness of her allusive and abstract language'. So Said invokes the processes of close reading in his support, for the most part convincingly, but in the end his appeal seems to be to the *conscience* of the (especially) white and middle-class reader:

> We cannot easily say that since *Mansfield Park* is a novel, its affiliations with a particularly sordid history are irrelevant or transcended, not only because it is irresponsible to say that, but because we know too much to say so without bad faith.

There is, I think, no doubt about the effect of reading Said's essay. Any 'innocence' we might have had about this aspect of the novel goes: it is impossible henceforth to read it without a constant awareness of that absentee settler-planter who is at the centre of everything, in one sense, and yet constantly withdrawn and marginal in another. Said's reading likewise locates the centre of the book in an absence, in things unsaid and unspecified. In this sense it is a form of Marxist criticism influenced by post-structuralist views, contrasting with Krieger's much 'straighter' Marxism. It also, like new historicism, comes closer to actually naming the details of a specific social/colonial situation (the absentee planter-landlord class of eighteenth-century Antigua) rather than just evoking a generalised notion of colonial exploitation.

Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory,* 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 198-200.

4.4 Colonialist criticism

Taken from *Colonialist Criticism,* by C. Achebe:

When my first novel was published in 1958 a very unusual review of it was written by a British woman, Honor Tracey, who is perhaps not so much a critic as a literary journalist. But what she said was so intriguing that I have never forgotten it. If I remember rightly she headlined it 'Three cheers for mere Anarchy!'. The burden of the review itself was as follows: These bright Negro barristers [...] who talk so glibly about African culture, how would they like to return to wearing raffia skirts? How would novelist Achebe like to go back to the mindless times of his grandfather instead of holding the modern job he has in broadcasting in Lagos?

I should perhaps point out that colonialist criticism is not always as crude as this but the exaggerated grossness of a particular example may sometimes prove useful in studying the anatomy of the species. There are three principal parts here: Africa's inglorious past (raffia skirts) to which Europe brings the blessing of civilization (Achebe's modern job in Lagos) and for which Africa returns ingratitude (sceptical novels like *Things Fall Apart*).

Before I go on to more advanced varieties I must give one more example of the same kind as Honor Tracy's which on account of its recentness (1970) actually surprised me:

> The British administration not only safeguarded women from the worst tyrannies of their masters, it also enabled them to make their long journeys to farm or market without armed guard, secure from the menace of hostile neighbours. The Nigerian novelists who have written the charming and bucolic accounts of domestic harmony in African rural communities, are the sons whom the labours of these women educated: the peaceful village of their childhood to which they nostalgically look back was one which had been purged of bloodshed and alcoholism by an ague-ridden district officer and a Scottish mission lassie whose years were cut short by every kind of intestinal parasite.
>
> It is even true to say that one of the most nostalgically convincing of the rural African novelists used as his sourcebook not the memories of his grandfathers but the records of the despised British anthropologists. The modern African myth-maker hands down a vision of colonial rule in which the native powers are chivalrously viewed through the eyes of the hard-won liberal tradition of the late Victorian scholar, while the expatriates are shown as schoolboys' blackboard and caricatures.
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> (Andreski 1971: 26)

I have quoted this at such length because first of all I am intrigued by Iris Andreski's literary style which recalls so faithfully the sedate prose of the district officer government anthropologist of sixty or seventy years ago – a tribute to her remarkable powers of identification as well as to the durability of colonialist rhetoric. 'Tyrannies of their masters' ... 'menace of hostile neighbours' ...'purged of bloodshed and alcoholism'. But in addition to

this Iris Andreski advances the position taken by Honor Tracy in one significant and crucial direction – its claim to a deeper knowledge and a more reliable appraisal of Africa than the educated African writer has shown himself capable of.

To the colonialist mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: 'I know my natives', a claim which implied two things at once: (a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand – understanding being a pre-condition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding. Thus in the heyday of colonialism any serious incident of native unrest, carrying as it did disquieting intimations of slipping control, was an occasion not only for pacification by the soldiers but also (afterwards) for a royal commission of inquiry – a grand name for yet another perfunctory study of native psychology and institutions. Meanwhile a new situation was slowly developing as a handful of natives began to acquire European education and then to challenge Europe's presence and position in their native land with the intellectual weapons of Europe itself. To deal with this phenomenal presumption the colonialist devised two contradictory arguments. He created the 'man of two worlds' theory to prove that no matter how much the native was exposed to European influences he could never truly absorb them; like Prester John he would always discard the mask of civilization when the crucial hour came and reveal his true face. Now, did this mean that the educated native was no different at all from his brothers in the bush? Oh, no! He was different; he was worse. His abortive effort at education and culture though leaving him totally unredeemed and unregenerated had none the less done something to him – it had deprived him of his links with his own people whom he no longer even understood and who certainly wanted none of his dissatisfaction or pretensions. 'I know my natives; they are delighted with the way things are. It's only these half-educated ruffians who don't even know their own people.' How often one heard that and the many variations of it in colonial times! And how almost amusing to find its legacy in the colonialist criticism of our literature today! Iris Andreski's book is more than old wives' tales, at least in intention. It is clearly inspired by the desire to undercut the educated African witness (the modern myth-maker, she calls him) by appealing direct to the unspoilt woman of the bush who has retained a healthy gratitude for Europe's intervention in Africa. This desire accounts for all that reliance one finds in modern European travellers' tales on the evidence of 'simple natives' – houseboys, cooks, drivers, schoolchildren – supposedly more trustworthy than the smart alecs ...

Achebe, C. 'Colonialist Criticism', in Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. (eds.) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader,* 2nd ed., Abingdon: Routledge, pp 73–74.

4.5 Language

Taken from *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader,* by B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin:

Language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the imperial centre – whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a 'standard' against other variants which are constituted as 'impurities', or by planting the language of empire in