

What postcolonial 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 postcolonial literatures, whereby states of marginality, plurality and perceived 'Otherness' are seen as sources of energy and potential change.**

Postcolonial criticism: an example

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 in 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, p. III), 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)' (p. 106).

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 colonisation are examined. As Mulhern puts it 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' (p. 97). 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 colonialisng 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' (p. 104). 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, (p. 112) 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.

Selected reading Ashcroft, Bill, and Ahluwalia, Pal, Edward Said (Routledge, 2001). A useful book in the 'Routledge Critical Thinkers' series. Ashcroft, Bill, et al., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature* (Routledge, 1989). A readable and comprehensive book which provides an excellent start on this topic. Ashcroft, Bill, et al., *The Post-Colonial Studies*

Reader (Routledge, 1994). Covers a vast range of material. Ashcroft, Bill, et al., Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts (Routledge, 1998). An A to Z guide by the Empire Writes Back team, Bhabha, Homi K., ed. Nation and Narration (Routledge, 1990). A definitive early collection in this field, with pieces by several of the major figures. Bhabha, Homi K., The Location of Culture (Routledge, 1994). Examines 'the cultural and political boundaries which exist in between the spheres of gender, race, class and sexuality'. Discusses Morrison, Gordimer and Rushdie. Not an easy writer, but (says Toni Morrison) 'any serious discussion of post-colonial/postmodern scholarship is inconceivable without referencing Mr Bhabha'. Césaire, Aimé, Return to My Native Land (Penguin Poets, 1969). This and the next title are early founding texts of postcolonialism, their status corresponding to that of 'classics' like The Female Eunuch or The Feminine Mystique within feminism. Fanon, Frantz, The Wretched of the Earth (Penguin, 1961). Gates, Henry Louis, Jr, ed. 'Race', Writing and Difference (Chicago, 1987). Loomba, Ania, Colonialism/Post-Colonialism (Routledge, New Critical Idiom series, 1998). Another good introduction. McLeod, John, Beginning Postcolonialism (Manchester University Press, 2000). An excellent and readable book in the 'Beginning?' series. Said, Edward, Culture and Imperialism (Vintage, new edn, 1994). A broad account of the 'roots of imperialism' in European culture. Said, Edward, Orientalism (Penguin, new edn, 1995). Said's work has been a major influence in this field, and he is a useful entry-point since his writing has an immediate accessibility and clarity of impact. This re-issue has a substantial new 'Afterword'. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (Routledge, 1987). Spivak is another major figure, but her close involvement with post-structuralism makes her writing quite demanding. A starting point might be her essay 'Draupadi' (on a Bengali short story, which she translates and reprints) in Newton's Theory into Practice. Walder, Dennis, ed. Literature in the Modern World (Oxford University Press, 1990). Contains Chinua Achebe's paper 'Colonialist Criticism', and other useful material in the relevant section.