

## Hayden White's Historical Theory: A Critical Analysis

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### Abstract

This study is an attempt to explore Hayden White's approach to the philosophy of historiography. The article explores White's work within the context of the cultural, existential, and linguistic evolution in intellectual and conceptual history in the western discourse. This study explores history on two fronts: the internal scrutiny of historical methodology and its external position vis-à-vis other disciplinary approaches. Moreover, this research tries to understand the deconstruction of social humanities, particularly historical studies, in the mid-twentieth century which further splits the question of meaning and representation in contemporary historical knowledge production. The study highlights White's works to explore splits and shifts in the perspective of the evolution of liberal humanism and its possible fall in the form of anti-humanism, which later transformed into an alternative position of post-humanism. The study uses multidisciplinary methods to explore White's historiographic approaches, concepts, and theoretical ideas which are claimed to be historical knowledge in the postmodern culture.

**Keywords:** Hayden White, historical theory, historiography, liberal humanism, anti-humanism, posthumanism, cultural history, postmodernism, conceptual history.

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### **Introduction**

There are different kinds of theorizations in White's historical writings. The present study examines the rise of historical theory during the emergence of intellectual agnosticism in the second half of the twentieth century, which tremendously affected history as a discipline and as a discourse. The study attempts to understand the concept of historical knowledge in the field of historical studies in postmodern times. White develops a historical theory during the period of intellectual crisis in social studies generally and in historical studies particularly. Through multiple theorizations and concepts, he transforms dead historicism into a meaningful representation to restore its epistemic value. After a detailed analysis of historical theory, its origin, development, and function, this article analyses selected aspects of White's historical discourse to highlight the nature and function of historical theory.

#### **1. Hayden White's Approach to History**

While doing history, White confronted late nineteenth and early twentieth century Western writings in trans-disciplinary areas. The meta truths of this period revolved around materialism, determinism, positivism, empiricism and psychology. These sets of ideas later evolved into postmodern historical consciousness which impacted historical theory in broader discourse. White, a medievalist and an interpreter of biblical texts, turned to modern historical thinking as his search for 'historical truth'<sup>i</sup> compelled him to examine historical texts ranging from Ibn-e Khaldun to Michel Foucault. However, White disagreed with Ibne Khaldun's anthropocentric and individualist approach, which later evolved into Renaissance thought in European studies (White, 1959, p. 110-125). Likewise, White categorized Foucault as an 'anti-humanistic historiographer'<sup>ii</sup> for whom discourse is not about humans as the center as he claims the death of the author (White, 1987, p. 107). White confessed that traditional history is the worst form of representation in social and cultural studies. However, he pushed the non-communicative and untranslatable historical discourse into more communicative mediums to build a more applied form of historical studies. His historical discourse evolves from historicism to new historicism and then to anti-historicism and seeks

to make conventional history more practical. This study explores the epistemological, ontological, and moral nature and objectives of White's historical theory.

## 2. **White's Model of Humanist Historicism**

White's early works like "The Papal Schism of 1130," an unpublished doctoral dissertation and *The Greco-Roman Traditions* published in 1973 reflect a liberal modernist discourse. White, being a major critic of the crisis of historicism, was greatly inspired by the modernists, i.e. Benedetto Croce, R G Collingwood, and Max Weber who introduced important concepts like the role of interpretation, societal structure, and human agency in the construction of knowledge, despite his debate about modernist epistemic agnosticism and distrust in subjectivity of knowledge. There were certain reasons for White's inspiration from modernism, i.e. the empirical and analytical approaches and methodologies which demythologized the early and later medieval restriction on knowledge production. The above-mentioned modernists developed critical theories to examine the anthropocentric approach in knowledge production. For White, the 'theory of re-enactment' (Collingwood, 1946, p. 282) and 'history, a story of liberty' (Croce, 1949, p. 59) ultimately changed the ideas of historical studies. The early work of White, like *The Emergence of Liberal Humanism* gave him an opportunity to study the evolution of nineteenth century 'historical epistemology' (Veyne, 1971, p. 42) of modernism.

### 2.1 **White's Theory of History as a Discourse of Desire**

White acknowledged figurative interpretation as a concept used in Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946), which Auerbach borrowed from Christian theologians. However, White reformulated and used it in a different meaning and context (White, 2010, p. 187). His early influence were medieval grand narratives and biblical scripts that acted as religion and history accordingly. The Old and New Testaments interacted with each other in such a way that the literal preserved, and the obscure became visible. However, White believes that these religious scripts were not able to achieve a desirable interpretation due to their proto-historic background. He believes that a historical system works due to the interpretation of background

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events, which play an important role in the meaning of later events, especially the case of causation and the lesson of history. White asserts that all historical imagination happens due to the historian's will of epistemic freedom and choice. These epistemic choices construct and reconstruct facts and push these arrangements into desirable meaning of cultural presence in representation. Thus, a hermeneutical circle develops due to the potential choice and selection of an independent alternative past. Hans Kellner calls for a Cultural Revolution in which anyone who does not agree with the determined and constructed historical past can reconstruct his/her own desired past. This choice allowed to historian is responsible for the process of civilizational and societal interlinking of events with each other. Thus, a functional and practical historical consciousness came into being which developed the cultural identity of human beings.

White raised questions about the historian's attempts to write narratives in the first place, (Paul, 2011, p. 110) i.e. if historical script possible without a narration or is narration possible without moralization. This examination challenges the authority of the author and the position of the reader about the construction of meaning in historical writings. White supported the non-narrative discourse, where the possibility of political and moral domestication of truth could come to an end. However, White differentiates between literary narratology and historical narratology. He believes that a good narration must have consistency in which 'events, agencies and agents' (Geoffrey, 2001, p. 222) work for the readers. He thus encourages the 'literariness of narration' in which things could be unsettled whenever need arises without any absoluteness of historical writings (Muszynski, 2017, p. 26-30). Tense, Time, order, duration, frequency, intentionality, action, and agency are basic elements which are responsible for the reconstruction of historical narrative structure (Munslow, 2007, p. 45).

The nature of history via narrative cannot be scientific and objective but is rather rhetorical. Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative* (1984) explored how different historians can interpret the same event in multiple ways like the Holocaust historiography in which historians like Raul Hilberg and David Irving provide completely different

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interpretations of the same historical event. The causation in speculative historical knowledge ultimately constitutes several poetic expressions in which the common masses are assured that the past has an impact upon the present and that the future can derive lessons from it. Pure sciences deeply impact the nature of historicization about 'internalization'<sup>iii</sup> and 'externalization.'<sup>iv</sup> The history of Europe highlights that industrial civilization supports a more conservative form of representation in which the working classes are suppressed by the will of narrative history to deduce and implant a specific bourgeois moral past. White deals with narration which directly affects the nature of objectivity which is based upon the historian's efforts to present an impartial and unbiased account of history.

Narrative representation needs the will of historians to tell the story or to give birth to a story from the gaps in which structural politics play a decisive role: "Stories are not lived but told" (Mink, 1970, p. 541). David Carr, a phenomenologist historian and philosopher, proclaims that 'reality in itself has a narrative structure' (Paul, 2011, p. 114) while White, Louis O Mink and Frank Ankersmit challenge D. Carr's interpretation. White and Mink believe that the beginning, middle, and end are important parts of the story which are absent in daily life: "There are hopes, plans, battles, and ideas, but only in retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive, and ideas seminal" (Paul, 2011, p. 114). The gaps in narration cannot be bridged simply by the rhetoric of interpretation but are impacted by politics.

White expressed reservations about the traditional realist form of historical writings, in which narrative structure ignores the contextual perspective. These debates hold that narratology is a 'distinct kind of explanation' (Kuukkanen, 2021, p. 20) due to the differences of logical positivism and empiricism' (Kuukkanen, 2021, p. 20). For most narrativist historians, story plays a major role in the construction of historical meaning while Whitean perspective denies any coherence in the meaning of story to communicate meaning in historical writings (Kuukkanen, 2021, p. 19).

### **2.2 White's Critique of Historical Realism**

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White resists the objective historical absolutism in his early writings which depict him as a postmodernist historiographer. His writing addresses the issue of real and imaginary in historical studies. However, he seems poetic while dealing with the desired discourse of history. “The Modernist Event” (White, 1999, p. 66) and “The Historical Event” (White, 1987, p. 41), highlight that the truth of the past cannot be the truth of the present. White coherently discusses the representation of the truth of the past chronologically and through annals format. The narration of an event or idea from the past has several figurations once it comes under interpretation, which may alter the overall understanding of that phenomenon. Truth of social humanities in the postmodern perspective is broadly characterized by skepticism of objective knowledge and denial of grand narratives. Instead, it is based upon multiple factors in which cultural hegemony, author’s subjectivity, historiographic metafiction, discourse of desire, and linguistic patterns play a major role in building meaning.

White was inspired by the Heideggerian phenomenology, which negates that truth could be present as historians consider it just a matter of archival documentation. Heidegger rejects the idea that we can make a judgment out of truth; truth is the disclosure of things (Cahoone, 1995, p. 47). White uses this disclosure of things in his historical discourse, where he finds it in the semiotics of language which play a major role in the representation of things. He asserts that historians cannot avoid the literariness of historical representation. Facts are suppressed fictionality, where narration takes a path of rhetoric and figuration. White’s cultural realism constitutes the structure of classic narration of nineteenth century historiography, to find out the nature and function of narrativity and the model which depicts a historical process in classical scripts. Historical realism emerges with the professionalization of historical studies which White considers the suppression of rhetoric and fiction.

Western empiricism demands that observable things must be there for any claims of truth and a meaningful coherence. White maintains that before French Revolution, historical writings were more poetic, literary, and rhetorical. In that overlapping period of disciplinary culture, fictional and historical writings were assumed to fall in the

same genre. Later, a distinction was made between truth and false narration which led to the age of scientism (White, 1968, p. 45). This era led different disciplines to a quest for scientific, objective authenticity. Scientific terms and conditions at that time were considered the ultimate sources of representing the real. That is why nineteenth century historians tried to present their study as scientific, based on historical realism.

This historical realism tries to escape from its parent discipline by distinguishing itself through historical methodology. White traced the decay of historical realism which came to an end with the fall of liberal humanism in the first half of the twentieth century. American relativism and pragmatism challenged this European form of historical realism by negating the distinct past, which did not play a role in the establishment of American historical consciousness. European historical realism claimed to be a theory of knowledge, but White has a difference of opinion regarding its nature and function. He declares it politically motivated and argues that its essence was truly exploitative (White, 1987, p. 185-214).

### **2.3 White's Composition of Historical Work**

In *Metahistory*, White gives a theoretical framework for historical writings in which he bases the conceptualization of historical work upon chronicles, story, mode of emplotment, and mode of argumentation. Things in historical studies are first organized into a chronicle upon the basis of events, followed by further arrangement of events which all flow into a story. Other important components of White's theory of historical work include the concepts of historical system, historical imagination, and historical consciousness. White believes that a "historical system" (White, 2010, p. 126-135) is not like a biological system as the latter is more flexible than the former, which is genetic and cannot change by our choice (White, 2010, p. 66). The model of historical system, on the contrary, is socially connected from one epoch to another. Historical imagination gives the ultimate power and vision to historians and general masses to create and recreate their humanness out of historical ripples (Frye, 1957, p. 94). Historical consciousness is the understanding of the temporality of experience, i.e. of how the past, the present and the future are

connected (Frye, 1957, p. 94). White charts out historical consciousness in the writings of the nineteenth century European historians and philosophers and examines historical consciousness to understand how modernist nature of historical writing defines human beings (White, 2006, p. 25-34). He highlights the development of historical consciousness in the rise and fall of the Roman Empire which happened due to the death of the pagan cultural ancestry by the will of the Romans themselves. Roman historical consciousness by choice created a different story from the past and converted it into a new cultural identity (White, 2010, p. 119-144).

### **3. White's Concept of Anti-Humanist Historicism**

In the field of historical studies, scholars criticize White's antihumanist paradigm for its open and inclusive attacks upon the nature, function, and objectives of historical knowledge production in the second half of the twentieth century. In modernist thought, humanism is portrayed as historicism, and historicism in response reflects humanism (Croce, 1949, p. 319). White reflects against the conventional and traditional historical approaches, which have claims to present the real with authenticity and scrutiny by using historical methodology.

#### **3.1 History as a Burden**

Defining the sophistication of history as a discipline, White highlights the nature of mid-nineteenth century historical writings, which were absurd in terms of its functions and objectives with respect to other genres of representation. White expresses his concerns about history as a 'conservative discipline, which has a 'methodological naivete' at the time when it became professionalized. However, this naive nature of historical methodology serves a good purpose to secure history from epistemological idealism. He informs us that most of the nineteenth century scholarship categorized history as a third form of epistemological investigation in which it can be placed somewhere between Aristotelian physics and Linnaean biology. White believes that the most challenging task of the present generation of historians is to locate the historically conditioned characters of historical studies (White, 1978, p. 29), which worked once as a nightmare to reduce the crisis of humanism against the successful attempt of anti-humanism



by the twentieth-century Western intelligentsia (White, 1978, p. 30). Croce, while rethinking historical modernism notes:

The writing of histories is one way of getting rid of the weight of the past. Historical thought transforms it into its own materials and transfigures it into its object and the writing of history liberates us from history (Croce, 1949, p. 44).

White's philosophy of historiography gives a new vision to representation in the presence of intensity, distress, anarchy, and violence which are part of our collective memories (Hughes-Warrington, 2008, p. 393). These things reinforce our emotions according to our desired objectives. Whitean interpretation is open to freedom and responsibility to choose its own epistemic reality, thus releasing historical research from the burden of the past.

### **3.2 History as a Fulfillment**

Historians try to present their ideas as the construction of the documented real past, rather than the reconstruction of the real. White states that the construction of the actual past is like the restoration of a painting or an archeological artifact, which has a great possibility of the destruction of the actual object. History is the least scientific in both achievements. Historical representation has many loopholes, which White highlights by referring to the second half of the nineteenth century, when history began to be professionalized. The insanity of modern civilization started migration into history as a place to resolve its existential problems, which gave birth to the modern chaos (White, 1978, p. 27-50). Further, when the twentieth century existentialists tried to find a meaningful order in the middle of modern crimes, there was a desire to identify a single path that would lead us to a meaningful life while, in reality, we need epistemic freedom to choose as many ways as possible. White believes that the conventional continuity of historical knowledge cannot fulfill and resolve the insanity of human beings but rather "require[s] a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot" (White, 1978, p. 27-50). He discloses that the de-humanization of historical experience would better resolve the representational crisis (White, 1978, p. 27-50).

The transformation of historical consciousness happened in the West once they committed ‘great crimes of the twentieth century’ and left nothing but transcendental, ontological, and cultural hopes. White mentions Paul Ricoeur, his fellow German historian and narratologist, whose idea of historical metaphysics seems to be the only possible option after ‘the death of God’. Only a historical ‘sorge’<sup>v</sup> and responsibility as a narration for fulfillment can cure the wounds of post-humanity (White, 2010, p. 321). White connects this historical *sorge* and responsibility with the study of the past. He argues that the study of the past is not an innocent act (Jenkins, 1995, p. 146-147). Cultural liberation is only possible if one studies the past with full care and application of all methodological tools, whether historical or borrowed from other disciplines.

### **3.3 White’s Theory of Narrative History**

In the nineteenth century Europe, differences between history and literature came to be emphasized. The concept of historical consciousness was reformulated, rephrased, and reconstructed in the late nineteenth century Europe, which further transformed a fictive discourse into scientific desires to fulfill the demands and objectives of social science. This formulation started a new era of disciplinary politics, which ended in the twentieth century by further specialization, in which other approaches debunked the idea of history as separate and independent discipline (White, 2006, p. 25).

Throughout his intellectual life, White has also examined the relationship between literature and history. He highlights those stories about knights and kings and the mythologies about the ancient world that fascinated him at his early age, which printed a literary imagination upon his consciousness (White, 1987, p. xi-xii). This came to define White’s views about the nature and function of literature in historical studies. He acknowledged his teachers and mentors, specifically Professor Bossenbrook, in understanding the ways by which communities, nations, and tribes communicate their stories whereby facts dissolved their existence in the fictionality of discourse.

The epistemic function of literature does not depict the representation of historical knowledge, but it gives a direct path through which a

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historical narration produces knowledge. White's history is the fictionality of the real through 'historical imagination'<sup>vi</sup> in which figuration and tropes play an important role (Brannigan, 1998, p. 3). However, events are not directly open to fictionality. Similarly, autobiographical and anthropological writings have a great sense of literariness, but they are not fictional in real sense (Koufou, 2000, p. 25). White indicates that the study of literature gives us an opportunity to understand the difference between the cultural real and the political, domesticated real.

However, language alone cannot present the complete picture of an event. A grammatical formation alone cannot fulfill a historical formation. Semiotics, discourse, and discursive concepts are approaches which fulfill the needs of historical studies. White believes that discourse is a much more independent and conscious tool to explore the underlying mysteries of the past 'desperately, in order to stay alive' (Koufou, 2000, p. 25). White's perspective substantiates that nineteenth and twentieth century politics of historical studies, whether romantic, realist, or modern, tries to present history as mathematical calculations. He acknowledges J. G. Droysen, a German hermeneutician who verifies that historical writings without poetical, rhetorical, and discursive interpretation are unable to present the real (Koufou, 2000, p. 25).

### **3.4 White's Model of Historical Hermeneutics**

Following the intellectual traditions which consider Hans Georg Gadamer as the father of modern philosophical hermeneutics, this study places Hayden White as the father of postmodern historical hermeneutics. White, for a long time, engaged himself in understanding the relationship between literature and history. He is believed to be the founder of the linguistic shift in historical writings; however, his early works were inspired by the Jewish scholar of hermeneutics, Moses Maimonides. White argued that historical work is impossible without the amalgamation of different interpretations. It shows that without possible interpretation, historical reality is impossible:

All historical narratives contain an irreducible and inexpugnable element of interpretation. The historian has to interpret his materials in

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order to construct the moving pattern of images in which the form of the historical process is to be mirrored. (White, 1973, p. 281)

White expresses his dislike of the politicization of interpretation. Ideology is something which corrupts the coherence of meaning and truth. He seems certain against all forms of political revolutions, which give support to the centralization of power in cultural and social epistemic order. The twentieth century is full of political shifts, especially in the eastern part of the world. Chinese and Russian consolidation of revolutionary power introduced more autocratic form of governments which in response encouraged historical materialism and historicism.

He emphasizes that different kinds of political interests rule the study of the past. He mentions it in *The Content of the Form* that the fate of fallen humanity appeals to the eschatological concerns in Medieval ages, which empower the rule of the saints, while in response modernity ensures that reason is supreme (White, 1987, p. 72). White ultimately disowns that miracles can be accommodated in historical interpretation. The interpretation of historical objects and their relevance are the prime concerns of White. Events need legitimacy of factuality which is there in the description, and description is an interpreting act. Facts are established and have a legitimate interpretation in the socio-political sphere of historical discourse (White, 2014, p. 13).

Historical facts are very different from scientific facts. Historical facts are open to interpretation and new meanings. White believes that archives, which possess primary facts, are politically designed chambers of epistemic violence, which are aimed at propagating and producing a desired community. However, facts which have the potential for multiple meanings are open to interpretation (White, 2014, p. 13). Meanwhile, if the discipline of history needs to flourish, the value of hermeneutic freedom is paramount.

History is not just a collection of facts, even if these facts are valid. Historians need something to add to the process of doing history. It is a structure which makes these facts intelligible. The narrative structure of the past dictates the philosophy of historiography. White deals with this narrative structure to uphold the

crisis of knowledge production. He put forward questions to illustrate the relationship between literature and history, for example, what kind of meaning is absent in narrative building, and how history can be the other of literature. White raises these questions to identify the presence of reality and the actuality of truth. He believes that "all histories are in some sense interpretations" of past stories and events (White, 1987, p. 24).

**4. White's Approach of Post-Humanist Historical Pluralism**

White's later works present historiographical transformation. He maintains that twentieth century historical writings completely altered the idea of eighteenth-century historical imagination. The pulp fiction and dismemberment of historical representation also happened at that time. The old humanism went bankrupt, and the new one suppressed all political realities. As a result, in the first half of the twentieth century, the ultimate human destruction happened during the two World Wars. Germans fought a 'successful war against all modernist ideas'.<sup>vii</sup> White was interested in the anti-humanistic project, but the question of historical pluralism set him free to search for more alternatives, which later aligned his theory with posthumanism. Posthumanism, for him, was an umbrella term, which accommodated the writings of the postwar period whether poststructuralist, subaltern, post-colonial, or historiological phenomenology, which aimed to liberate humanity from the burden of falsification of historical representation and its cultural reflection in values. His detailed analysis of Derrida and Foucault's discourses in the field of intellectual history pushed him to the edge of post-human historiography.

White used structural discourse, inspired by Roland Barthes's poststructuralism and semiotics, which deeply affected and transformed the 'liberal humanist agenda' of historiography.<sup>viii</sup> It was the power of postmodern historical discourse which destabilized the official narrative of history. For all these shifts and turns, White used four levels of the theory of interpretation. The first one is 'atomic one,' which deals with an individual element or factor in historical process or writings which are responsible for historical change of period or ideas. The second one is molecular that works to order these

events but not to draw a story. The third one is organic, in which imagination transforms into story. Finally, when the above process has come to an end, the birth of reason takes place, which transforms the past into history.

White seems dominantly under the influence of Italian historians and philosophers throughout his writings like Vico and Croce who were primarily humanists in their epistemological objectives. However, he also expresses his inspiration in the later twentieth century by the 'phenomenological liberation of meaning.'<sup>ix</sup> White developed a dream-able discourse in which the essence of discourse is Tropologic, which can only appear with the relationship of meaning (White, 1978, p. 2). He differentiates between discourse and language. Discourse for White is more self-conscious about the possible use of language while language is not that free and active in building meaning within the sphere of other meanings.<sup>x</sup> Discourse gives an alternative way to make meanings possible even at the same level of phenomenon where it functions in the background of post-humanism (Koufou, 2000, p. 14).

#### **4.1 White's Concept of Historiophoty**

Historiophoty deals with the discussion of digital, visual, cinematographic, and photographic representations of the real. White believes that the content of visual sources is more representable and accessible for the historical existence of things. His historical theory also explores the relationship between and the nature of real and imaginary, which can be presented through lens and camera. The known postmodernist historian, theorist and cinematographic analyst, Robert A. Rosenstone (born 1936), who contributed many writings about the relationship of history and film, acknowledges and borrows White's historical theory about the structure of the past and its representation for his own innovative work *History on Film, Film on History*. White in one of his essays defends Rosenstone's position about the nature of images and their representation (White, 1988, p. 1193-1199). The latter highlights that events are not freely accessible, but rather these events on the screen are the selection of images which try to present the reality which would be but a constructed picture. These images cannot speak to us independently but rather emerge because of narrative formulation and reproduction which translates its

meaning and texture. Thus, Robert A. Rosenstone theorizes that the film can better communicate the past as compared to historical studies.<sup>xi</sup> White's historical theory favors digitalization of historical knowledge. Digital humanities deal with all the tools and techniques which are used for the extraction and transformation of information from one historical epoch into another. He acknowledges German cultural theorist, Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940) idea about historical reality, which came into being as image and not as story.

White introduces the concept of "historiophoty" (White, 1988, p. 1) for historical understanding which makes more inclusive representation of our thoughts through visual images and cinematic discourse. He raises an important question while reviewing an essay of Rosenstone regarding the cinematographic representation of historical craft: "is it possible to represent a historical and verbal text or account in cinematic discourse without any loss of the content?" (White, 1988, p. 1). He supports the idea of experimental filmmaking where what exactly happened would be presented but not in the context of conventional Bollywood cinematography in which "myth, chased from the real by the violence of history, finds refuge in cinema" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 31).

#### **4.2 White's Propositions of Psychohistory**

As mentioned earlier, White's perspective on historical studies considers the role of cognition in building meaning in the production of historical knowledge. History, for White, is the study of change, with the passage of time, with the conscious intervention of cognition while constructing stories or narration to represent an era or an idea from the past to communicate it with the present. Whitean perspective always encourages subjective or cognitive participation in historical discourse (Ankersmit, 2013, p. 47-66). White proposes that content and form combine with the structure to construct and portray a story whether tragic, comic, or ironic. Cognitive ability primarily participates in the construction and structure of a story. White also supports the argument that stories do not exist in the external world, but that we construct them in our own cognition (Ankersmit, 2013, p. 19). The documents, archives, and artifacts are only dead material from where we must make a story of our own interest and desire.<sup>xii</sup>

### **4.3 White's Idea of Ontic Historiosophy**

While doing history, historians must include and exclude the fabric of representation from the events of the past to reconstruct a desirable discourse. White highlights that for many centuries history was assumed to be a discipline or a discourse of narrating stories till it became scientific in nineteenth century Europe due to the dominant scientific methodology (Oakeshott, 2002, p. 86-168). The historical past is the expected wishes and desires of the community of historians about the events of the past while the practical past deals with one's own personal and psychological aspects of life. Historians deal with the past for the sole reason of knowledge seeking while the rest of the people deal with it for common existential affairs. White differentiates between cognitive and moral approach to the past. The terms 'pastology' and 'historiology' which White uses, developed because of Heideggerian etymology.

White's perspective confirms that historical narrations are bound by the aesthetics and ethics of historians. The events in the past cannot be perceived or observed directly. The Whitean paradigm takes a more radical but constructivist form which ensures itself by the fictivity of narration. Here it transforms its nothingness into historical narration which establishes a concept of existential truth for historical writings (White, 2014, p. x-xi). As famously stated, it is the business of historians to create real stories when everything is left in chaos. In the words of White:

By fiction I mean a construction or conjecture about "what possibly happened" or might happen at some time and some place, in the present, in the past, or indeed even in the future. Defense of this position would require forays into ontology and epistemology, not to speak of the ethics and aesthetics of historical writing for which this is not the occasion. (White, 2014, p. 11)

### **4.4 White's Framework of Axiological Historiography**

Hayden White emphasizes upon the intervention of historians in unbuilding the inherited meanings of the past. His writings highlight a moral need for the community of historians to reconstruct a past which is free of prejudices and biases. He considers history as a moral philosophy due to the hermeneutic nature of historical writings. The



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question “what is the purpose of history for life?” (White, 2014, p. 11) clearly identifies the position of White in the field of historical studies. However, he is not just a traditional realist, for which objectiveless analysis is the key to discourse. Rather, he emphasizes that all discourses, whether subjective, or objective, have elements of tropes. He is strongly and broadly against the political and official use of history to manipulate the will of people. He strongly condemns the prejudice of Western Civilization in constructing a Eurocentric historical consciousness, which is a clear form of epistemic violence: “The purpose of all his writings, therefore, is to reconstitute history as a form of intellectual activity which is at once poetic, scientific, and philosophical in its concerns” (White, 2014, p. x-xi).

White argues that the political use of history by totalitarian and authoritarian regimes is not only epistemologically dangerous but also immoral:

One can never move with any politically effective confidence from an apprehension of ‘the way things actually are or have been’ to the kind of moral insistence that they ‘should be otherwise’ without passing through a feeling of repugnance for and negative judgment of the condition that is to be superseded. (Kolchin-Miller, 2019, p. 29-46)

Whitean aesthetics and ethics of history highlight the construction of a story or the narration of a story. As this study earlier mentioned, White rejects conventional medium of representation, through which a simple documented and archival source can transmit the story of human intention and its objective conditions.

White borrows a concept of historical universalization from his fellow narratologist, Paul Ricoeur, who emphasizes upon a special morally conditioned consciousness. Through these moral and epistemic entities, White investigates the question of how to bridge and harbor paradoxes, illusions and deflection which are there in historical studies. This historical universalization is there to build a specific morality-based consciousness which leads our own form of modernity and postmodernity to the next level from uncertainty and a period of crisis (White, 2010, p. 321-322).

White encourages narrative history which gives reasons for existence in the presence of chaos and anarchy for human beings. The

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domesticated politics of historical facts like the political goals to civilize the militant society are based upon medieval values to rule ruthlessly, and search for new colonies, which have shrunk the unknown world into a known global village. Postmodern aesthetic and ethical assumptions hold that the most “beautiful will” (Han, 2020, p. 59), will dwell upon the production of historical knowledge, which will disclose fantasies and draw more meaningful ways for themselves and for the upcoming generation (White, 1987, p. 72).

### **Conclusion**

The late twentieth century is important due to the influences of different theories presented in different areas like deconstruction by Derrida, hermeneutics by Gadamer, structural discourse by Foucault, and semiotic historical discourse by White. These theories that are historical in nature have impacted contemporary discourses from literary theory to historical theory and from psychic theory to gender theory: “Narration is both the way in which a historical interpretation is achieved and the mood of discourse in which a successful understanding of historical matters is represented” (White, 1987, p. 60). These understandings are responsible for knowledge production, which makes historical discourse an important genre in the field of social and human sciences.<sup>xiii</sup> In the larger context, White’s historical theory highlights the historiographic attempts to demystify the medieval aristocratic regimes of truth in Europe and the postmodernist cultural attempts to de-romanticize and de-ideologize narrative and speculative assumptions of liberal discourses. White’s historical discourse is discursive in its origin in which language reinforces its function. The ‘Emplotment’ of events and modes of interpretation in *Metahistory* are figural which enact both the real and imaginary phenomena in historical studies.

Why did the revolutionary era in Europe come to an end? This question deeply affected the origin of historical realism in bringing historical studies into a professional discipline in late nineteenth century Europe. The emergence of history as a discipline was meant to demystify the prejudices whether in social or political studies (White, 1978, p. 121-124). White was a critic of this demystification of the old order. His realism highlighted that these projects of

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representation further politicized the story of history. White's cultural realism tried to de-ideologize and depoliticize this specific story, having traces in the modern era. He projected the value of narrativity in historical theory, which has the capacity to construct and deconstruct the meaning of existence in a non-narrative history.

The nineteenth-and-twentieth-century Europe experienced a shift of disciplinary ideas in which the study of history and the writing about history were differentiated based on literary and rhetorical works. Historians tried to present historical studies free of linguistic and fictional structures. White's analysis noted how this was intellectual dishonesty on behalf of those working on literature. This initial deflection in historical knowledge production about language, consciousness, and reality deeply affected the discourse of historical studies in the late twentieth century. This was not because 'philosophers of history'<sup>xiv</sup> as compared to 'philosophers of historiography'<sup>xv</sup> consider language a transparent medium through which everything was possible. Historical theory emphasized that it was because of the conventional historian's attempts to use plain language without any figuration. Philosophers of history tried to construct a meaningful historical knowledge with different modes of representation and explanation, which created variations of description with different series of Emplotment to explore the nature of the origin of facts and how in response historical knowledge was produced and reproduced in the process of historization.

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### Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> White's writings confirm historical truth as human truth.
- <sup>ii</sup> "Discourse is not life: its time is not your time; in it, you will not be reconciled to death; you may have killed God beneath the weight of all that you have said; but don't imagine that, with all that you are saying, you will make a man that will live longer than he." Narration from Michael Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books Press, 1972), 211.
- <sup>iii</sup> Making something part of oneself by the process of socialization.
- <sup>iv</sup> An unconscious defense system about external world.
- <sup>v</sup> Heideggerian Care of existence.
- <sup>vi</sup> White, "Value of Narrativity in Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form*, 1-25. White deals with historical imagination in the linguistic figuration of historical writings.
- <sup>vii</sup> German has succeeded in the Second World War on the cultural and intellectual grounds. Phenomenological anti-humanism dominated the world of ideas till today.
- <sup>viii</sup> Liberal humanists insist upon anthropocentric approach.
- <sup>ix</sup> Martin Heidegger explored themes related to the liberation of meaning and the concept that reality can be understood as a choice in various works, particularly in his philosophical investigations into *Being and truth*. A key text in which Heidegger engages with these ideas is "Being and Time" (1927) (*Sein und Zeit*) and "The Question Concerning Technology" (1954). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger discusses the nature of *Being*, how human beings (Dasein) engage with the world, and how meaning is not fixed but constructed through our experiences and interpretations.
- <sup>x</sup> This is why we can agree with Bloom's contention that all interpretation depends upon the antithetical relation between meanings, and not on the supposed relation between a text and its meaning. *A Map of Misreading* (1975) Bloom explores the idea that literary interpretation is shaped by the *antithetical* relationships between different meanings, rather than a direct correspondence between a text and a singular meaning. He argues

that meaning is generated through a struggle between different readings, interpretations, and influences.

<sup>xi</sup> Dianne Bennett, "Interview with Warren Beatty's Reds historical consultant, Robert A. Rosenstone,"

<https://www.2filmcritics.com/interview-with-warren-beatty-s-reds-hist>

<sup>xii</sup> "I always tell my students that the events are not the facts, and the facts are not the meaning. There are events; you can constitute them as facts; then you ask what the meaning of the facts is; and that is when you begin the work of Emplotment and making stories." Angelica Koufou, "Hayden White: The Ironic Poetics of late Modernity," *Historian: A Review of the Past and other Stories* 2 (2000): 14.

<sup>xiii</sup> A body of knowledge.

<sup>xiv</sup> From Augustine, Machiavelli, and Vico to Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Croce and Spengler.

<sup>xv</sup> From Thucydides, Tacitus to Michelet, Carlyle, Ranke and Johann Gustav Droysen.