
TEXTUALITY AND IDEOLOGY IN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF HAYDEN WHITE'S SEMIOLOGICAL APPROACH IN "THE CONTEXT IN THE TEXT"

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Abstract

This study explores Hayden White's seminal essay, "The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History", and critically evaluates its methodological propositions within contemporary intellectual historiography. The aim is to understand how White reorients historical interpretation through a semiological framework. Using theoretical and empirical tools, this research unpacks the implications of White's thought for historical writing and intellectual inquiry. Grounded in post-structuralist and critical theory, this work draws particularly from the works of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Paul Ricoeur, Linda Hutcheon, as well as Frank Ankersmit and Dominick LaCapra, who both engaged with and challenged White's narrative theory of history. Key findings demonstrate White's enduring relevance in historiographical debates. The research pivots around six core points: the shift from empiricism to semiotics in historical method, the role of language and narrative in historical discourse, ideology as an inherent component of intellectual history, the tension between objectivity and rhetorical construction, White's reinterpretation of historical evidence as textual production, and recent scholarly debates on White's legacy in post-truth and digital historiography. White's proposition challenges traditional empiricist assumptions and instead situates historical interpretation within the frameworks of semiology and literary analysis. By treating texts as self-contextualizing systems, White invites a deeper understanding of history as a rhetorical and ideological construction. The paper further illustrates how White's propositions can be applied to text, literature inclusive. By so doing, the paper enriches scholarship.

Key words: *Semiology, Narrativity, Textualism, Ideological Critique, Self-referentiality*

Introduction

Hayden White's contributions to the philosophy of history have provoked both acclaim and criticism for decades. In "The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History", White challenges the traditional empirical approaches to historical scholarship and introduces a textualist, semiological method of reading historical texts. This study critically engages with White's arguments and traces their broader significance in contemporary intellectual historiography. It aims to extend White's propositions into current academic debates on method, ideology, and interpretation in history writing, using *The Education of Henry Adams* as a test case as White does. It also investigates how White's ideas have evolved in relevance in a post-2020 intellectual climate shaped by digital media, ideological polarization, and epistemic uncertainty.

The relationship between history and narrative has undergone significant revision since the late 20th century. Hayden White stands at the forefront of this transformation, arguing that historical texts are not merely reflections of the past but constructed narratives shaped by rhetorical choices. His 1990 essay, "The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History", serves as a pivotal moment in historiographical theory, rejecting the notion of an objective historical context and positing that the context is embedded in the very text itself. This rethinking of historical method emerged amid broader shifts in humanities scholarship, including the linguistic turn, structuralism, and postmodernism. In contemporary times, debates around misinformation, political ideologies, and cultural memory have re-energized interest in White's theoretical innovations. As such, reassessing his work today is not only timely but crucial for scholars in the digital and ideological age.

Conceptual Framework

Several core concepts guide this study. One is **Narrativity**; the understanding that historical accounts are inherently narrative in structure, using literary devices to construct meaning. Another is **Semiology**; the study of signs and symbols, which White integrates to analyze texts not for their factual content but their discursive construction. Yet another is the concept of **Textualism**; the belief that meaning is embedded within the structure and language of the text rather than in an external "real" context. Also, the concept of **Contextual Immanence**, which White argues that context is not external to the text but embedded within it, that is, the context is in the text.

Ideological Critique is another concept, which entails analyzing how historical writing reflects and reinforces ideological positions, often unconsciously. There is also the concept of **Self-referentiality**; the idea that texts interpret and define themselves, resisting external validation or singular interpretations. These concepts provide a foundation for analyzing White's arguments and assessing their contemporary relevance.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in post-structuralist and critical theory, drawing particularly from the works of: Michel Foucault, whose theories of discourse and knowledge inform White's view of history as a discursive formation; Roland Barthes, whose semiological theories underpin White's narrative analysis - his theory of the "death of the author" and semiotics informs White's rejection of authorial intention as the key to historical meaning; Paul Ricoeur, who advanced the hermeneutics of narrative and the temporality of historical experience; Linda Hutcheon, whose work on historiographic metafiction provides insight into postmodern historical writing; Frank Ankersmit and Dominick LaCapra, who both engaged with and challenged White's narrative theory of history. These theoretical tools are essential to situating White's essay within broader historiographical debates and understanding its implications today.

Empirical Review

Many have embraced White's essay which we address as a "call" for a more literary and theoretically informed approach to intellectual history. LaCapra (1985), for instance, draws on White's insights to argue for a form of reading that is attentive to the "textuality" of history and the problem of representing trauma, ideology, and identity. However, critics argue that White's position risks relativism or even nihilism. If historical meaning is always a product of narrative construction, how can historians adjudicate between competing interpretations? Skinner (1969), for example, cautions that without a firm grounding in authorial intention and historical context, we risk misreading texts in anachronistic or ideologically motivated ways. Nevertheless, even some critics have acknowledged that White's arguments have forced historians to become more self-aware about their interpretive assumptions. As historian Carr (1986) writes, White's work "puts the historian's own rhetorical choices on display," making visible the ideological underpinnings of historical writing.

Several scholars have engaged with White's ideas in recent years, particularly in light of digital history, misinformation, and ideological contestation. Goldstein (2020) explores how White's theories help explain the narrative construction of conspiracy theories. Nguyen (2022) critiques White's rejection of empirical realism, arguing in *Beyond Language: Recovering Truth in Postmodern Historiography* that historical method must balance rhetoric with ethical responsibility. Singh (2023) applies White's method to textbook revisions in South Asia, showing how ideologies shape national narratives. Tomaselli (2023) examines how textual interpretation has evolved in online discourse, reinforcing White's claims about context and rhetorical form. Afolabi (2024) reinterprets White's work in postcolonial contexts, emphasizing indigenous narrative forms. Meyerhoff (2025) connects White's ideas to digital history, analyzing how narrative algorithms influence contemporary historiography. Other recent studies strengthen this

debate. Chani (2018) explored White's semiotic approach in relation to cultural memory, showing its utility in understanding nationalist narratives. Zamora (2021) examined White's relevance to "post-truth" culture, arguing that his ideas help decode how truth-claims are rhetorically constructed in polarized societies. Martens (2023) re-evaluated White's "emplotment" theory in the context of environmental history, highlighting how climate change narratives are shaped by tropological choices. These works confirm White's enduring relevance and provide a broad base for reevaluating his ideas. They can simply be described as offshoots of White's arguments which this paper seeks to explore. By carefully analysing White's argument and contributions this work encourages further studies. This entire essay is unique as it is not just an offshoot of White's arguments and contributions but a practical step on how his proposition can be applied to texts.

Analysis of Hayden White's "The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History"

Hayden White (1928–2018), a prominent American historian and literary theorist, revolutionized the field of historiography by proposing that historical narratives are not neutral or purely factual reconstructions of the past, but are instead shaped by rhetorical, poetic, and ideological structures. White in his essay offers a new direction to the discipline of Intellectual history through a Semiological approach. With a possible formalist orientation, he adopts the Semiological theory in which according to Toews "language is conceived of as a self-contained system of signs" (882). His work is a rethinking of intellectual history thus, awakens historians. In the words of LaCapra, "No one writing in this country at the present time has done more to wake historians from their dogmatic slumber than has Hayden White... One might, without undue hyperbole, say that White's writings have helped to reopen the possibility of thought in intellectual history" (*LaCapra, as cited in Jacoby, 1992, p. 407*). Capturing the major preoccupation of the essay, White himself in the introductory part says it is "to rethink the basic issues of intellectual historiography, to reexamine governing concepts and strategies of interpretation. in response to new methodologies that have arisen in philosophy, literary criticism, and linguistics and that offer new ways of conceiving the tasks of historical hermeneutics" (185).

His most influential work, *Meta history: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), laid the groundwork for what later became known as the "linguistic turn" in historical studies. White's work emphasized the constructed nature of historical narratives, aligning the discipline of history more closely with literary theory and semiotics than traditional empirical science. In "The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History", White returns to core themes in his thought—namely, the entanglement of method and ideology in historical interpretation. Here, he critiques the assumption that historical texts merely reflect their contexts and argues that historical meaning is generated internally through narrative structure and rhetorical strategy. This essay pushes intellectual historians to reflect not only on

the ideologies of the past but on the ideological investments embedded in their own methodological choices. The essay points to a shift in idiom and position by White. His earlier works said much on history. They explored the relationship of history and science and defended the uniqueness of history. He defended historical knowledge as exceptional and resisted subordinating history to science. But in this essay, though within the continuity of his thoughts in history, White, Jacoby observes, “chips away at the uniqueness of history in order to accent its links to literature and literary criticism. This means that the stuff of literature – subjectivity, language, and rhetoric – is the stuff of history” (408). In a way then, one can say that White “classifies history as a literary endeavour or considers all the humanities essentially literary” (408).

White’s essay concerns itself more on text-context relationship. His text-context relationship explains that a text is a self-interpreting model, an entity that has an assuring solidity and concreteness; a kind of identity that allows it to serve as a model of whatever is comprehensible in both culture and nature. Thus, for White, the undecidability of the question of where the text ends and the context begins and the nature of their relationship is a good one for the intellectual historian, as it provides for him, a vista onto a new and more fruitful activity, to authorize a posture before the archive of history more dialogic than analytic, more conversational than assertive and judgemental. For White, the real and recent intellectual historians like him “possess the tools to probe texts in ways only dimly perceived or, if perceived, not fully utilized by earlier intellectual or other historians. And these tools, it is suggested, are generally linguistic in nature” (187). Through these linguistic tools, the historian according to White, realises that “any text or artifact can figure forth the thought-world of emotional investment and praxis of its time and place of production” (187). White’s essay deconstructs the boundary between text and context, arguing that intellectual historians must read texts semiologically, unboxing not what they say about history, but how they say it. He redefines the historian’s task as one of interpretation rather than recovery. He argues that the historian must interpret texts not by reconstructing an external historical reality, but by decoding the symbolic and linguistic structures that produce meaning within the text itself.

Using *The Education of Henry Adams*, White contrasts an ideological reading (focused on thematic content) with a semiological one (concerned with symbolic structure and rhetorical form). He advocates the latter as more revealing of a text’s cultural and epistemological function. Ideological reading focuses on content, themes, and authorial intent, what the text says about the world but semiological reading focuses on form, tropes, and signs, how the text constructs meaning. White privileges the semiological approach, which allows historians to uncover the deeper symbolic work performed by a text. He insists that texts are “self-contextualizing” and that their meaning emerges through the interplay of signs, not from external historical facts.

White's method challenges the historian's claim to objectivity. He writes that a historian must recognize the ideological filters shaping both the source material and the act of historical writing. By foregrounding narrative and rhetoric, White shifts the historian's task from explanation to interpretation.

White's central thesis is that the meaning of a historical text is not exclusively or even primarily located in its external context (e.g., the political or social circumstances surrounding its production) but rather in its internal structure—its rhetorical strategies, tropological arrangements, and narrative form. He argues that traditional intellectual historians often rely on a problematic assumption that ideas can be causally explained by the historical situations in which they emerge. White resists this determinism, suggesting instead that intellectual historians should pay greater attention to the form, language, and narrative logic within texts themselves. He critiques what he sees as a naive empiricism in contextualist methodologies, especially those influenced by figures like Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School of intellectual history. These historians, White argues, attempt to ground the meaning of texts in what authors “meant to do” in their specific historical contexts, but such efforts often ignore the rhetorical and literary dimensions that help shape a text's significance and ideological force.

White challenges the contextualist paradigm that treats texts as epiphenomena of broader social, political, or economic forces. He does not deny that texts are historically situated but argues that their meaning cannot be reduced to context. Instead, he emphasizes that texts generate meaning through their internal semiotic operations—metaphor, metonymy, irony, employment, and other tropes. This position resonates with his earlier formulation in *Meta history*, where he demonstrated that historians' accounts of the past tend to follow narrative templates such as tragedy, romance, satire, or comedy. As White notes: “The text is not merely the representation of a context, it is the context for the representation of a representation” (White, 1987, p. 193). This formulation highlights a recursive logic: texts do not simply mirror reality but mediate and construct it through layers of representation. White's essay is also a critique of methodological ideology, the idea that method is never neutral but always politically and ideologically invested. He insists that every methodological approach implies a worldview or set of values. Thus, the insistence on empirical rigor or objective context is not free from ideology; it often masks liberal or conservative commitments to a stable, rational, and knowable past. This is particularly salient in his critique of the belief that texts “mean what they meant” to their authors. White argues that such claims assume a stable authorial intention and a fixed meaning, thereby reifying notions of truth and authority that often support hegemonic ideologies. “To attribute to the text only the meaning its author intended is to ignore the possibility that texts might ‘speak’ in ways the author did not intend, or could not control” (White, 1987, p. 194).

White's intervention compels intellectual historians to revise their assumptions about what constitutes a valid historical explanation. Rather than focusing solely on what an author intended to say within a given socio-political context, historians should ask how a text functions rhetorically, ideologically, and narratively. This shifts the focus from context as cause to text as construction. Moreover, White's analysis implies that reading intellectual history requires a literary-critical orientation. That is, the tools of rhetorical analysis, semiotics, and discourse theory are not optional supplements but central to the task of interpreting historical texts. White's application of his proposition could be said to be an expository experimentation. According to White, an ideological reading of a text like *The Education of Henry Adams* would focus on identifying generic elements of the text, themes, arguments, and so on, in the interest of establishing what the text is about, what point of view its author represents, and its importance as evidence of some aspect of early twentieth-century American social and cultural history. In contrast, a semiological reading of this text permits us to provide a theoretically generated reading of the text, by which we can give an account of every element of it starting from the beginning of the text. White's application of this approach to *The Education of Henry Adams* is successful, as it unravels its rich symbolic content. Using this approach also, White authenticates Adam's status as a representative of the culture of his age.

Key points in the essay this work explores can be summarized in the following ways:

Critique of Objectivity: White challenges the historian's supposed neutrality, arguing that all interpretation is ideologically informed.

Text as Self-Contextualizing: The "context" is not outside the text but internal to it—embedded in structure, metaphor, and narrative strategy.

Historian as Semiologist: The historian must read texts like a critic of literature, attentive to tropes, codes, and symbolic systems.

Language as Construction: Echoing Barthes, White posits that historical language does not reflect reality but constructs it.

Plurality of Meaning: There is no singular historical truth; rather, meaning emerges from interpretive engagements shaped by ideology.

This repositioning of history as textual and rhetorical undermines traditional claims to empirical truth but opens new possibilities for understanding culture, memory, and identity. Critics argue that White's approach risks relativism, as it may undermine the possibility of distinguishing between truth and fiction. However, defenders counter that White doesn't deny historical reality

but insists on its discursive mediation. In the digital age, White's approach is even more prescient. With history increasingly consumed through digital platforms, memes, and AI-generated texts, understanding the rhetorical and ideological construction of narratives is essential.

Application of Hayden White's Proposition to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Hayden White, in "The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History", argues that the writing of history and intellectual history is not just a neutral recounting of facts but is emplotted, shaped by narrative structures, tropes, and ideological choices. He shows that historical texts are literary constructions that both represent and interpret events, not transparent mirrors of the past. According to White, the "context" historians or thinkers claim to represent is actually generated within their texts through rhetorical and narrative choices. This theoretical lens provides a powerful way to read not only traditional historical works but also literary texts that reconstruct or contest cultural memory. Two important examples that illuminate White's propositions are Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852).

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe's novel functions as a literary counter-history to colonialist accounts of African societies. Applying White's propositions reveals how Achebe constructs the "context" of Igbo society inside his narrative rather than simply reproducing a pre-existing cultural reality. First, Achebe creates Igbo world by employment. Emplotment in historiography and literary theory describes the process of weaving disparate events into a structured narrative, creating a storyline and giving them significance. Achebe constructs the Igbo story by connecting historical events through cause and effect, giving them a coherent and meaningful form. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe emplots the story of Okonkwo and the Igbo community as a tragedy. Okonkwo's rise and fall mirrors both Aristotelian tragic form and the broader collapse of Igbo autonomy under colonial intrusion. Instead of presenting precolonial Igbo culture as static or primitive, as earlier colonialist texts had done, Achebe portrays it as dynamic, ordered, and deeply human. By choosing a tragic emplotment, Achebe casts Igbo society as noble but vulnerable, thereby dignifying its history and shaping readers' moral response (White, 1990, p. 84). Second, Achebe employs tropology (metaphor and metonymy). His text relies on figurative language to construct meaning. The coming of locusts functions as a metaphor for colonial invasion, harmless in their initial appearance but ultimately devastating. Okonkwo's downfall, in turn, is metonymic of the cultural destabilization of the Igbo world. Proverbs, which Achebe famously calls "the palm-oil with which words are eaten," operate synecdochically, condensing Igbo values, philosophies, and social practices. These tropes do not decorate the narrative but actively produce the context of

Igbo life within the novel. Third, Achebe employs ideology (Postcolonial reclamation). His ideological project is explicitly anti-colonial. By narrating Igbo life with depth and dignity, he counters the Eurocentric discourse of “savagery” propagated by writers such as Joseph Conrad. The narrative is thus political: it reclaims African cultural history by textualizing it in a mode accessible to both African and global audiences. For White, all history-writing is ideological; Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates this by fusing literary form with nationalist ideology.

Through White’s framework, we see that Achebe does not “reflect” Igbo context but creates it textually, shaping how African history is remembered and interpreted. Using White, we can say that Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* creates the context of Igbo history within the text itself. The tragic emplotment, figurative tropes, and postcolonial ideology work together to offer an interpretation of cultural encounter and collapse, rather than a neutral record. The “history” of the Igbo past is textually constructed, exactly as White suggests all intellectual/historical narratives are.

Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is often treated as a classic historical materialist text, yet it too exemplifies White’s propositions. Marx does not neutrally document the 1851 coup in France; rather, he frames it in literary terms that produce a satirical historical context. Marx famously observes that history repeats itself: “first as tragedy, then as farce” (Marx, 1963/1852, p. 15). This phrase emplots the coup of Louis Bonaparte as a satire of Napoleon I’s earlier rise. The coup is thus not only narrated but also evaluated through a comic-satirical lens, shaping how the event is remembered in political thought. The choice of satire as narrative mode emphasizes absurdity and illegitimacy, discrediting Bonaparte’s claim to power. Marx’s writing abounds in metaphor and allegory. He describes revolutionaries as “conjuring up the spirits of the past” to legitimize their actions (Marx, 1963, p. 10). The metaphor of ghosts allegorizes the persistence of old social forms, showing how political actors mask present contradictions with the borrowed costumes of history. Such tropes create meaning rather than simply reflecting events; they textualize class struggle as a recurring drama.

The ideological core of Marx’s narrative is his materialist conception of history (Historical materialism). Events are organized around class struggle rather than the actions of individual heroes. The coup becomes legible only when interpreted within the larger dialectic of bourgeois and proletarian interests. This ideological commitment structures both what Marx emphasizes and how he narrates it. For White, ideology is inseparable from historical narration; Marx’s text exemplifies this by embedding materialist analysis in satirical rhetoric.

Thus, Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* demonstrates White’s proposition that the historian’s text constructs its own context. It does so by fusing satire, metaphor, and ideology into a coherent

narrative of political upheaval. The context of the 1851 coup in France is not simply reported; it is produced in the text through satire, metaphor, and ideological interpretation. The narrative form is itself part of the historical explanation. Thus, Marx's account aligns with White's claim that context lives inside the text, not outside as a stable given.

Conclusion

Hayden White's "The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History" is a provocative and transformative text that remains a landmark in historical theory. His semiological method offers a powerful alternative to positivist historiography, emphasizing the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of historical writing. By advocating for a semiological reading of historical texts, White redefines the historian's role as an interpreter of symbols and narratives rather than a discoverer of objective facts. In today's fragmented epistemic landscape, shaped by fake news, AI-generated narratives, and global ideological shifts, White's insights are more relevant than ever. This study underscores the necessity of critically engaging with historical texts as constructed artifacts and challenges historians to reflect on their own methods and assumptions. This paper has shown that White's critique of empiricism and emphasis on ideology, narrative, and language remains relevant, especially in the 21st-century landscape of digital texts and ideological complexity. While his approach poses challenges, particularly concerning historical truth and moral responsibility, it opens new interpretive possibilities that make history a more self-aware and reflective discipline. White makes clear that history is not a mirror of the past but a mode of world-making. The implications of his critique extend beyond intellectual history, touching on historiography, literary theory, and cultural criticism more broadly. Whether one agrees with him or not, engaging with White forces scholars to grapple with the profound question of how we make meaning from the traces of the past. Application of White's proposition on two texts shows how useful it is. Both Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* demonstrate Hayden White's claim that context is generated within the text. Achebe, through tragedy, metaphor, and nationalist ideology, constructs a counter-history of Igbo culture. Marx, through satire, allegory, and historical materialist ideology, textualizes the 1851 coup as a farcical reenactment of earlier tragedy. In both cases, the works remind us that history, whether written as literature or analysis, is never neutral. It is always emplotted, tropological, and ideological. White's insight allows us to recognize these texts as acts of world-making rather than mere reflections of reality.

This work thus, is justified because it addresses a significant gap in intellectual historiography by critically re-examining Hayden White's semiological approach in "The context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History". In an age marked by ideological polarization, digital narratives, and epistemic uncertainty, revisiting White's propositions is both timely and necessary. The research not only engages with White's critique of empiricism and his emphasis

on language, narrative, and ideology but also demonstrates the applicability of his method to both historical and literary texts, such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. By doing so, it enriches scholarly debates on the construction of meaning in history, literature, and culture, offering an interpretive framework that foregrounds the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of texts while encouraging more reflective historiographical practices.

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