

# The Effect of Social Context on the Formation of Cultural Identity and its Fashioning According to Stephen Greenblatt

Abdelnaeim Ibrahim Awad Elaref

Majmaah University, Department of English Language, College of Sciences and Humanities at Al-Ghat and South valley University - Faculty of Arts

**Abstract:** *The focal point in this paper, "The Effect of Social Context on the Formation of Cultural Identity and its Fashioning According to Stephen Greenblatt", is to highlight Greenblatt's attitude towards the forming of the cultural identity. It pays attention to Greenblatt's belief that the culture of any society plays a significant role in shaping the identity of its people. In this respect, literature, which is one of the essential constituents of the cultural products, may determine the identity of its readers. Going further, this study examines Greenblatt's Renaissance Self-Fashioning to show how he relates the fashioning of the self to outside factors. To prove the credibility of such vision, Greenblatt studies a number of the renaissance writers.*

**Keywords:** New Historicism- cultural identity- Renaissance- self-fashioning

## 1. Introduction

Greenblatt is interested in confirming that the New Historicism partially aims at clarifying the relationship between texts and cultural backgrounds. By doing so, he stresses, as a first step, that critics must abandon both the formalist conception of literature as an autonomous aesthetic order transcending any needs or interests, and the urging notion that writing simply mirrors a stable and coherent ideology endorsed by all members of a society. But this is not all what Greenblatt's agenda has; he is much more concerned with explaining that the literary text represents both the cultural identity of a society and the way through which this culture is constituted. It is on these grounds that he believes the literary text makes readers adhere to the practice of their own culture.

This primary concern with the importance of the cultural role in forming the identity is conspicuously elaborated on in Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, written in 1980. The title of the book suggests the main concern of the New Historicism in general. Unquestionably, literature is considered as one of the social forces that interfere in constructing the cultural identity of its readers. Nevertheless, this idea seems to a great extent similar to the Marxist assumptions. But still, as Myers assumes, the New Historicists are eager to distinguish themselves from the Marxist critics. Both the New Historicism and the Marxist criticism call into question the traditional view of literature as an autonomous realm of discourse with its own problems, forms, principles, and activities; both also relates the literary text to the social and political context. But a thorough comparison of the two critical movements may result in showing that the New Historicism tries explicitly to solve the Marxist criticism's difficulty of relating the cultural superstructure to material bases. Such an attempt may put the New Historicism in a position opposite to Marxism. (*The New Historicism in Literary Study*)

Moreover, Greenblatt's idea about the self and its fashioning may sometimes get closer to the attitude of other critics such as Foucault and the Marxists, but at the same time it contradicts others, such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon. He believes that 'identity' is not free, but it is formed by many social factors. Commenting on *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Paul Steven writes:

In its somberly dramatic closing lines, so deeply influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, it seems to announce a generation's shift in interest from the individual to the social—a recognition that authors were dead in the specific sense that they and the literature they produce could no longer be read independently of society's larger process of agency. (492)

Here, Steven refers to the influence Foucault has on the writings of Greenblatt, and his belief that society plays an essential role in fashioning the self.

Depending on Geertz, Greenblatt believes that the individual's identity is part and parcel of the surrounding culture. He regards literature as one of the mastering mechanisms. It is one of the constituents of the "cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 3). However, in such a cultural system, literature functions in three interlocking ways. Firstly, it is a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author. Secondly, it is in itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped. Finally, literature should be a reflection of those codes.

Greenblatt avows that the critic should lay all focus on these three functions of literature at once. Any critical reading, which disregards any of the literary functions in a text, will not approach a full critical appreciation of it. See the following excerpt from Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*:

Volume 9 Issue 9, September 2020

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If interpretation limits itself to the behavior of the author, it becomes literary biography ... and risks losing a sense of the larger networks of meaning in which both the author and his work participate. If, alternatively, literature is viewed exclusively as the expression of social rules and instructions, it risks being absorbed entirely into an ideological superstructure... Finally, if literature is seen only as a detached reflection upon the prevailing behavioral codes, a view from a safe distance, we drastically diminish our grasp of art's concrete functions in relation to individuals and to institutions, both of which shrink into an obligatory "historical background" that adds little to our understanding. (4)

Literature is not to be regarded as only an expression of the social practices. He also refuses the second way of reading the text because, as Richard Strier suggests, "he wants to avoid the crudities of (vulgar) Marxist 'reflection theory,' and to work in terms of analogy and parallel manifestation rather than in terms of social or economical causation" (384). In addition, he rejects the notion of reading the context of the literary text as a mere historical background. It is indeed, he maintains, to read the text by following the three strategies referred to above.

By this alternative strategy of reading, Greenblatt believes to be able to understand the way through which the self is constructed. Being influenced by Geertz, this critical method seems to be more anthropological or cultural, as discussed here:

Literary criticism that has affinities to this practice must be conscious of its own status as interpretation and intent upon understanding literature as a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture; its proper goal, however difficult to realize, is a *Poetics of culture*. (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 4-5)

But this culture-based criticism is followed by a long list of scholars, such as: Geertz, James Boon, Mary Douglas, Jean Duvignaud, Paul Rabinow, Victor Turner, and others. All these anthropologists suggest that human beings are born as unfinished animals, and that they interact with their cultures to be capable of understanding their reality. They think that "anthropological interpretation must address itself less to the mechanics of customs and institutions than to the interpretive constructions the members of a society apply to their experiences" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 4).

One of the most serious problems Greenblatt faces is that of understanding the relationship among the central terms of his discourse - understanding how literary works draw upon their founding cultures and, perhaps even more centrally, how "selves" stand in relation to conventions and cultural materials. Analyzing the role of the self as an agent for culture is Greenblatt's primary concern which comes at the center of his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Greenblatt must have been conscious of the fact that the exercise of cultural forces over the writer, and

anybody else, in a community cannot be avoided; therefore this should not be ignored by any criticism. He argues that the disputes of the cultural forces remain "resolutely dialectical" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 3), and his book details fascinatingly the tense relationship among the forces that fashion the selves.

It can be inferred from Greenblatt's "cultural poetics" that the refusal to "wall literature off" from other symbolic structures and the aggressively interpretive style are sustained by the assumption that "humans themselves ... in Clifford Geertz's phrase, [are] cultural artifacts" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 3). Thus, the only cultural artifacts, human actions, events, and productions should be the focus of any critical interpretation. It is unquestionable that literary texts are reflexive of any social practices. In other words, both share in the construction of one vast and interlocked web of human production. It is this belief in the character of human life as fabrication that authorizes the interpretation not only of literary texts but also of those materials that has often been declared "beyond interpretation" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 5).

To seek how the literary text holds the mirror to the social fact, and what of the literary devices a writer uses to form a piece of work having the outlines of a social life that, as Greenblatt sees, occupy the mind of any critic, it is necessary to regard the language used by the writer. Greenblatt clarifies this in the following quotation:

The words that constitute the works of literature that we discuss here are by their very nature the manifest assurance of a similar embeddedness. Language, like other sign systems, is a collective construction; our interpretive task must be to grasp more sensitively the consequence of this fact by investigating both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text. (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 5)

Thus, language, the main constituent of any cultural identity, is indeed interconnected with other cultural factors, which in their turn construct the cultural identity of both the writer and the reader. Language is bound up with the questions of identity because it is the medium of expressing our ideas and communication with others. Greenblatt sees language in the English Renaissance as a discursive power, a social self-fashioning force, and an impression of the temporal aspect of history.

This attitude towards language lies at the center of Greenblatt's essay on *The Tempest*, "Learning to Curse". Greenblatt contextualizes the characters' ideas and use of language with reference to Cicero:

Virtually every Renaissance schoolboy read in Cicero's *De Oratore* that only eloquence had been powerful enough 'to gather scattered mankind together in one place, to transplant human beings from a barbarous life in the wilderness to a civilized social system, to establish organized

communities, to equip them with laws and judicial safeguards and civic rights'. (20)

Language is the only thing that lessens the human aggression and alters man's life almost to the better. One can say that it is indeed a means of civilizing humans in primitive or barbarian communities. To Greenblatt, drama subverts colonialism by allowing the colonized Caliban an eloquence with which elude his civilized masters and so wins out on the Ciceronian standard. Thus, as Paul Hamilton suggests, Greenblatt "uses this resource of Renaissance education to sketch a colonialist mentality from his own position of postcolonial disapproval" (156).

In his early works, Greenblatt elaborates on the relation of language to reality. His essay "Marlowe and the Will to Absolute Play" refers to the ways in which Marlowe's characters fashion themselves through language. He thinks that language is detached from reality (the signifier from the referent) even though the characters try to fill the existential void with words. He asserts that

Magnificent words are spoken and disappear into a void. But it is precisely this sense of the void that compels the characters to speak so powerfully, as if to struggle the more insistently against the enveloping silence. (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 200)

The individual's identity is seen through language as a reaction to the void. This same idea echoes that of fashioning the identity as a reaction towards colonialism.

Referring to the powerful ability of literature to keep any culture alive, Greenblatt confirms that "great art is an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 5). However, he believes that the critic who reads the sixteenth century literature feels that it is impossible to leave behind his own cultural situation that constructed his identity. He assures us that "it is everywhere evident in this book that the question I ask of my material and indeed the very nature of this material are shaped by the questions I ask of myself" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 5).

The construction of the identity is one of the central topics that Greenblatt is interested in. He devotes much of his efforts to the study of the self formation in the era of the English Renaissance. In his introduction to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), Greenblatt indicates that his book aims at figuring out the ways through which identity was constituted in the sixteenth-century English culture. He argues that the social context in which his authors lived was controlled by a variety of authorities (institutions such as the church, court, family, and colonial administration) or some agencies (e.g. God or a sacred book) and that these powers came into conflict because they endorsed competing patterns for organizing the social experience. Greenblatt argues that "in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process" (2).

The putting out of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* is in itself a reflection of the complexity of these forces. The book is divided into two "triads". The first includes More, Tyndale, and Wyatt. The second includes Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare. All depend "upon the perception of two radical antitheses, each of which gives way to a complex third term in which the opposition is reiterated and transformed" (8). In the first triad Greenblatt treats Thomas More, William Tyndale, and Thomas Wyatt. This triad focuses on the ways in which these figures presented and represented their *own* identities in their lives and works. This triad "represents a shift from the Church to the Book and then to the absolutist state" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 8). In addition, the second triad represents a shift from "celebration to rebellion and then to subversive submission" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 8). But the third term, Greenblatt asserts, is not a term of resolution. He also maintains that Wyatt and Shakespeare "express in literary works more powerful than any produced by their contemporaries the historical pressure of an unresolved and continuing conflict" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 8).

In his long chapter on Thomas More, Greenblatt tackles More's biography, his experience of the historical events, writings, and the culture of the Henrician court. Greenblatt details the interplay between self-fashioning and self-cancellation which are basically based on the cultural influence. Moreover, Greenblatt thinks that More's fashioning of the self is mixed with another view point in which the self is cancelled. However, behind More's active "fashioning self" and the playful "ridiculing self" is concealed the self-cancellation. Greenblatt concludes that "Utopian institutions are cunningly designed to reduce the scope of the ego... There is no place in Utopia then for the dazzling extravagance, the sumptuous waste that fascinated and repelled More" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 39). The dynamics of Greenblatt's own framework of self-construction and self-cancellation drive him to see Utopia as primarily "a society designed to reduce the scope of the inner life" (53). Greenblatt is here attributing his own framework to More.

Besides, Greenblatt sees that More also maintains the power of the institutions which he criticizes, "discarding [their] exclusiveness and particularity", which, however, restrict the "sense of personal inwardness" associated with them (44). In *Utopia*, More restricts and diminishes "self-differentiation and private inwardness" (45). In other words, Utopia gives no room for the private self. The position of the community is magnified compared with the individual. Philip Edwards suggests that "in *Utopia*, privateness is done away with and inwardness is an irrelevance, for in the Utopian community there can be no distance between the public and the private self" (317).

To More, the ancient Catholic church was, as Greenblatt finds out, the only community capable of cancelling self-differentiation. The submission of the individual to the church and cancelling his identity in front of it was, according to More, a matter of self construction. Hence, More's *Utopia* seems to be the sort of commonwealth that would exclude the private self. Greenblatt claims that More is "not present in [the] new order" of the *Utopia* and that

"his very absence is paradoxically a deep expression of his sense of himself, for, as we have seen, his self-fashioning rests upon his perception of all that it excludes, all that lies in perpetual darkness, all that is known only as absence" (58). The identity of man is restricted to the powerful position of Church in the community.

As for Tyndale, Greenblatt regards him as the same as More, in that both are involved in "a complex dialectic of external manifestation and inner conviction" (110). Despite their standing at opposite ends of a great debate, each seeks something external to himself in which he could totally merge his identity. To Tyndale, the Bible is "*the consensus fidelium* ...the principle of intelligibility and the justification of all action: 'Without God's word, do nothing'" (99). Therefore, it is hardly surprising to discover that the Bible, whose translation took most of his life, playing a great role in forming his literary works. Much more important, he sees the Bible as "the point of absolute, unwavering contact between God and man" (111), itself a "form of power", as Greenblatt asserts down here:

It is invested with the ability to control, guide, discipline, console, exalt, and punish that the Church had arrogated to itself for centuries. And lest this be thought inflated rhetoric, let us recall that James Bainham simply could not live with the pain of what he took to be his betrayal of the book; he preferred death. (97)

Since Tyndale's life is not something autonomous, something he possessed, Greenblatt sees that it "had already ceased to exist. It had been fully absorbed in his great project" (106).

In his analytical scrutiny of Tyndale and More, Greenblatt probes into the relationship between obedience to the external and internal authority. In Tyndale's case, Greenblatt highlights the relationship between the biblical and personal authority in order to uncover Tyndale's radical identification with the bible even when the text became more accessible and less immediate:

Distance from the scribal hand, production in relatively large quantities, mechanisms of distribution far distant from the author and printer, refusal of subordination to a ritualized verbal transaction, the very lack of aura - all that we may call the *abstractness* of the early Protestant printed book- give it an intensity, a shaping power, an element of compulsion that the late medieval manuals of confession never had. (86)

Greenblatt here sheds the light on Tyndale's idea that the lacking of aura that printed books have compared to the manuscripts do not mean that they lacked a special kind of presence. What Greenblatt does succeed in evoking, as Richard Strier assures, "is a sense of the psychological and cultural impact of the printed vernacular New Testament and of early Protestant printed books" (388). The Bible thus had exercised a shaping power or influence on the writer's identity and work.

Going further, Greenblatt describes Tyndale as a man who challenges the existing church. He thinks that human actions must be attributed to an inner state which, however, must be experienced as an irresistible force outside the self. It is something "alien to the self". Greenblatt assumes that God's word is capable of dominating, destroying and recreating the humble man. He gives up his resistance, his irony, his sense of his own shaping powers, and experiences instead the absolute certainty of a total commitment, a binding, irrevocable covenant (111). He becomes no more the maker of his own identity.

To conclude, Greenblatt's point of view of More and Tyndale shows up that both agree in opposing authority and offering a substantial resistance to the institutional life. The two authors also could not deny the authority of the institutions over the human identity. The self's identification is bound to what lies outside of it, and by doing so; it negates any idea of its independence.

As for Thomas Wyatt's case, Greenblatt overturns the familiar view suggesting that Wyatt's poetry puts the constraining and repressive power of literature in opposition to the social traditions and the force of personality. Such an opposition is taken by Greenblatt as "a romantic misreading of the early sixteenth century" (120). Greenblatt argues

There is no privileged sphere of individuality in Wyatt, set off from linguistic convention, from social pressure, from the shaping force of religious and political power. Wyatt may complain ... but he always does so from within a context governed by the essential values of domination and submission, the values of a system of power that has an absolute monarch as head of both church and state. For all his impulse to negate, Wyatt cannot fashion himself in opposition to power and the conventions power deploys; on the contrary, those conventions are precisely what constitute Wyatt's self-fashioning. (120)

Thus the opposition that may appear in Wyatt's poems is really controlled by the dominating state. Similarly, the identity is restricted to the absolutist state.

Furthermore, Greenblatt refers to Wyatt's court lyrics as an outlet where he participates in the competitive struggle to express himself more powerfully, intensely and persuasively than anyone else in the court. Of course this was to win the audience's sympathy and respect, or even to hurt enemies; in short, this is meant to dominate. And in order to do this, Greenblatt assumes, he "enlists and helps to create the forces of realism, manliness, individuality, and inwardness for which his poetic speaker is so well-known" (154). But such characteristics should not be understood as being independent traits of character or as expressions of a personal feeling of Wyatt's self. They clarify Wyatt's own need to compensate himself with an identity that he lacks in reality. This identity possesses such traits, and he uses the poems as diplomats or ambassadors through which he represents his pretended self in the world of Henry's court. In this respect Philip Edwards comments

The proposition is that as a diplomat Wyatt learned the requirements of the power game between nations; at home he learned the requirements of the power game at court. He applied the techniques of the power game in sexual relations, and his poetry both exemplified the power game and was used by him as a weapon in the power game. (318)

The apparent sense of individuality in Wyatt's poetry is, in fact, an illusion created, as Greenblatt claims, by his extreme competence in "a cultural competition" (120). His poetry as well as his self should be regarded as produced in and by the cultural and social forces of which they are a part.

Once again, Greenblatt's analysis of the three main figures shows that More, Tyndale, and Wyatt have similar points of view towards 'identity'. This similarity is made clear in restricting More's identity to Church; Tyndale's to the Bible; and Wyatt's to the court or the absolutist state. Although Greenblatt highlights the various ways through which Wyatt resists the social compulsion giving an impression of a resisting self, he returns to clarify that this self is actually an illusion. Such type of identity shown in his poetry is for getting nearer to the king and for constructing his real self, whose essence is connected to the king. However, Greenblatt takes the position that the greatness of Wyatt's poetry lies, as Philip Edwards argues, in "the manner in which it gives itself away" (319). In other words, Greenblatt assumes that the "courtly self-fashioning seizes upon inwardness to heighten its histrionic power; inwardness turns upon self-fashioning and exposes its underlying motives" (156).

In the second triad, Greenblatt begins with Edmund Spenser. "There is", Philip Edwards argues, "an adventurous and imaginative study of the correspondences in the real world with the destruction of the Bower of Bliss in Book Two of *The Faerie Queene*" (320). Greenblatt believes that Spenser has a relationship with the court, which to some extent makes him resemble Wyatt's. Spenser celebrates the court of "Gloriana" and his work is greatly interested in the process of self-fashioning, a process that is deeply connected with a larger cultural practice. It is related to Rhetoric as a method of the theatricalization of culture, and to the manuals of court behavior popular in Spenser's time (162). See Greenblatt's critical appraisal on Spenser:

It is to a culture so engaged in the shaping of identity, in dissimulation and the preservation of moral idealism, that Spenser addresses himself in defining "the general intention and meaning" of the entire *Faerie Queene*: the end of all the book, he writes to Raleigh, "is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline." The poem rests on the obvious but by no means universal assumption that a gentleman can be so fashioned, not simply in art but in life. (169)

This is the difference between Spenser and Wyatt. Wyatt prefers to put himself away from the claim of defending the court. But Spenser declares his celebration of the court. In

other words, Spenser's self-fashioning is self-conscious and harmonious with Gloriana's court.

Greenblatt also thinks that Spenser is a defender of the dominant power of the court. Obviously, Spenser is different from Wyatt, Marlowe and Shakespeare, in that he makes his art function as a "countermeasure", as a means not of questioning the dominant ideology, but of protecting it from questioning by turning all critical attention away from the topic and laying it on the poem's artfulness, as Greenblatt suggests here:

Far from hiding its traces, *The Faerie Queene* announces its status as art object at every turn, in the archaic diction, the use of set pieces, the elaborate sound effects, the very characters and plots of romance. For the allegorical romance is a mode that virtually by definition abjures all concealment; the artist who wishes to hide the fact that he is making a fiction would be ill-advised to write about *The Faerie Queene*. (190)

Thus, this type of art leads to its degradation. It is used to magnify the powerful attitude of those who are holding the authority.

Greenblatt believes that Spenser's art does not lead to a critical perception of the dominant ideology; rather it affirms the "existence and inescapable moral power of ideology" (192). It is clear that any critic will not question anything in Spenser's poetry but its artfulness. There is no ideology that deserves any focus. Spenser's identity is clearly related to his celebration of the dominant power and the protection of ideology. It is not strange then to find Philip Edwards calling him "a poet of empire" (320).

In coming to estimate Marlowe's art, Greenblatt concentrates on his *The Jew of Malta*. He highlights the vexed relation between art and ideology as it appears in his Protagonist. The protagonist is an individual who hates the society where he lives. He turns out to be a "rebel and blasphemer" (253). Greenblatt assumes that Barabas, like Marlowe's heroes in general, is excluded from the world in which he regards himself as an alien person, although he is embedded in it. Greenblatt argues that he is "very largely constructed out of the materials of the dominant, Christian culture", and his identity is a "fiction composed of the sleaziest materials" of that culture (207). Thus, instead of seeing the development of his character toward its complexity and specificity, as it is ordinarily done in literary works, we can follow that what actually occurs is the character's progressive de-individuation. Barabas' language is the language of proverbs and clichés, and he willfully and regularly identifies himself with the most vulgar, "abstract," anti-Semitic fantasies of the period (209).

But the rebellious identity of Marlowe's protagonist is still connected with the dominant ideology of the society where he is settled. "Marlovian rebels and skeptics remain embedded within [the] orthodoxy" even when they move actively to separate themselves from it (209). The protagonist also declares himself to be "in diametrical opposition" to their culture "they simply reverse the

paradigms and embrace what society brands as evil." By doing so, Greenblatt claims that they "unwittingly accepted [society's] crucial structural elements" (209). So that any effort done by the protagonist, to resist his being negatively stereotyped by his society, is in reality an act of incorporation. However, it is an unintentional contribution to the latter.

Greenblatt refers the reader's attention to the limitation of rebellion. While Marlowe's hero realizes the importance of behaving freely and acting on his behalf as a man who makes his own history, he finally figures out that he is shaped by outer forces. Consequently, his actions and deeds should not be regarded as acts of self-definition or self-distinction, but they should be regarded as "brilliant parody" (214). Therefore, Greenblatt argues that this way of constructing the self makes it clear how the selves are "tragically bounded by the dominant ideology against which they vainly struggle" (214). Greenblatt's analysis here, as that of More and Tyndale, uncovers a repeating theme: acts of separation and rebellion are also acts of inclusion; self-definition is finally another form of self-effacement.

Nevertheless, Greenblatt claims that Marlovian heroes are mere theatrical beings. They show a theatrical energy or histrionic extremism. They are dramatic but illusive. Greenblatt's description of these types of heroes is worth quoting:

They take courage from the absurdity of their enterprise, a murderous, self-destructive, supremely eloquent, playful courage. This playfulness in Marlowe's works manifests itself as cruel humor, murderous practical jokes, a penchant for the outlandish and absurd, delight in role-playing, entire absorption in the game at hand and consequent indifference to what lies outside the boundaries of the game, radical insensitivity to human complexity and suffering, extreme but disciplined aggression, hostility to transcendence. (220)

Greenblatt describes these heroes' practices as forms of both self-destruction and self-creation. They are self-destroying because the characters who engage in them risk their lives, and self-creating because in their reckless resistance of authority they try to rid the dominance of ideology so as to free their wills. Greenblatt describes this, in a characteristically Derridean language, as a "play on the brink of an abyss, absolute play" (220).

However, Greenblatt's appreciation of Marlowe's plays reveals that their rebellious heroes do not oppose the surrounding culture. Rather, their culture locates their resistance in acts of an intense narrative self-consciousness and aesthetic intensity, in acts of "absolute play", to use Derrida's phrase. Their acts of disobedience and rebellion are actually confirming the dominant ideology of their time.

Thus, it can be inferred from what has been discussed of some of Marlowe's works that Greenblatt suggests the impossibility of the existence of any authentic heroic resistance. Yet, his analysis uncovers another form of

resistance, which he describes as the illusive resistance. Marlowe's heroes are doomed to social incorporation; that is, even in their illusive resistance they offer a domineering ideology. It is on these grounds that the shape and definition of resistance in Marlowe is distinctly literary and decidedly deconstructionist in form: having no faith in transcendental values, the Marlovian hero embraces the inevitable fictionality of his life for an anarchic pleasure. Life is not a play to be transformed into something else, but rather an absolute play- a play which is separated from anything outside it. The "abysmal" nature of this "play" at once threatens the hierarchical structures and ordinary relations, and offers resistance to their power. When Marlowe's heroes resist absorption into the superstructure, they do so through their concentration on the power of language and their feeling of themselves as fictional constructs, whose acts are always acts of a "play." Marlowe's heroes are fictional, characters who are determined by the surrounding culture.

Now attention needs to be turned to Greenblatt's handling of Shakespeare. Greenblatt regards Shakespeare as a writer conceiving himself to be a "dutiful servant content to improvise a part of his own within [his culture's] orthodoxy" (253). Shakespeare takes his place in Greenblatt's second triad in which he represents a shift from "celebration" to "rebellion" to "subversive submission" (8). In his analysis of *Othello*, Greenblatt refers to the mode that he calls "improvisation". This mode is basic to understanding the very confusing practices of Iago's character. It is essential to comprehend the behavior of the great European explorers as they "cast down the idolaters and open[ed] the New World to Christianity" (226). To Greenblatt, "Improvisation"

depends first upon the ability and willingness to play a role, to transform oneself, if only for a brief period and with mental reservations, into another. This necessitates the acceptance of disguise, the ability to effect a divorce... between the tongue and the heart. Such role-playing in turn depends upon the transformation of another's reality into a manipulable fiction. (228)

Greenblatt assumes that the Spanish explorers, who raided the Lucayas and persuaded the natives to return with them and work in the goldmines of Hispaniola, succeeded because they could grasp the way the Lucayan religion functioned by perceiving it as an ideological construct, which they had subverted for ritual and mythical purposes. To rephrase it, they subverted the religion of the natives to use its assumptions, rites, and founding "myths" for their own purposes. Greenblatt maintains that it is essential to perceive the "Europeans' ability again and again to insinuate themselves into the preexisting political, religious, even psychic structures of the natives and to turn those structures to their advantage" (227).

*Othello's* Iago is the central example of the mode of improvisation. He succeeds to manipulate Othello's lack of trust in his personal religion and his deep-rooted fear of being unable to fulfill the expectations imposed upon him by a Christian society to which he is alien.

Greenblatt sees that Iago manipulates Othello's commitment to the Christian doctrine of sexuality. Othello is afraid that his sexual pleasure with Desdemona is sinful. "Othello's identity is entirely caught up in the narrative structure that drives him to turn Desdemona into a being incapable of pleasure, a piece of 'monumental alabaster,' so that he will be able to love her without the taint of adultery" (251).

Consequently, Iago fictionalizes the "other" through the character of Desdemona. This is revealed in his reference to the vulnerability and the fluidity of the character of Othello which may once have seemed a fixed symbolic structure, or the stable self. Then Iago moves, as Greenblatt sees to perform the mission of revising, reimagining, and refashioning. But while Iago has the "role-player's ability to imagine his [own] nonexistence so that he can exist for a moment in another and as another" (235). 'Self-cancellation' and 'self-loss' are hardly acts of humility. Instead, they merely conceal the "ruthless displacement and absorption of the other", (236) which are indeed Iago's aims. In addition, Greenblatt states that *Othello's* characters are submitted to narrative refashioning. Othello tells the story of his own adventures, and by this story he constructs his fictional identity in front of Desdemona. And "Iago knows that an identity that has been fashioned as a story can be unfashioned, refashioned, inscribed anew in a different narrative: it is the fate of stories to be consumed or, as we say more politely, interpreted" (238).

Greenblatt adds that Desdemona's sexual intensity is connected with Othello's predicament. Her eroticism "unsettles the orthodox schema of hierarchical obedience" (240). Nothing in Othello and Desdemona's relation

conflicts openly with Christian orthodoxy, but the erotic intensity that informs almost every word is experienced in tension with it. This tension is ... a manifestation of the colonial power of Christian doctrine over sexuality, a power visible at this point precisely in its inherent limitation. That is, we glimpse in this brief moment the boundary of the orthodox, the strain of its control, the potential disruption of its hegemony by passion. (242)

As for what Greenblatt calls Desdemona's "erotic submission" (244), it, in fact, joins unintentionally Iago's secret manipulation to undermine Othello's "carefully fashioned identity" (244). This because Othello believes that he loves his wife excessively, a love which violates the doctrine of what Calvin and others called "comeliness in conjugal intercourse" (248); yet this love makes him vulnerable to Iago's insinuations of Desdemona.

Greenblatt's point here is that "pleasure constitutes a legitimate release from dogma and constraint" (248), which might have caused the churchmen to extend their "surveillance and discipline" even to married couples by warning them that "excessive pleasure in the marriage bed is at least a potential violation of the Seventh Commandment" (249). It is through the identification of marital sexuality with adultery that Iago gets into Othello's consciousness, manipulates it, and reforms it by conforming it with his own terrible story about the

married couple's relation. Othello thereby submits to narrativity, and his "life [is] fashioned as a text is ended as a text" (252)

Greenblatt turns attention to the identification of both Iago and Shakespeare himself. To him, Shakespeare is a "master improviser" (253), which does not mean that the dramatist performs an unqualified "service to power" (253), but rather means that he is an "unwavering, unquestioning apologist for Tudor ideology" (254). Greenblatt attributes a kind of resisting the structures of power to the character of Desdemona. This resistance arises from her submission to the power of her husband as Greenblatt shows down here:

as both the play and its culture suggest, the arousal of intense, purposeless pleasure is only superficially a confirmation of existing values, established selves. In Shakespeare's narrative art, liberation from the massive power structures that determine social and psychic reality is glimpsed in an excessive aesthetic delight, an erotic embrace of those very structures- the embrace of a Desdemona whose love is more deeply unsettling than even an Iago's empathy. (254)

Like Marlowe's heroes - whose aesthetic play is also the means of their liberation - Desdemona's sexuality, though apparently conforming, dislocates the hierarchical relations and offers them resistance. This is why Greenblatt calls Shakespeare's stance a 'subversive submission'. The challenge to power offered by Desdemona is by no means overt; it is by nature covert and its strength is most likely concealed. Still, it is in just such resistance that we find "intimations in Shakespeare of a release from the complex narrative orders in which everyone is inscribed" (254).

Depending upon his knowledge of the sixteenth century culture, Greenblatt argues that English authors, including Shakespeare and Marlowe, were dominated by the power of a variety of institutions (e.g. Church, court, family, and colonial administrations, as well as agencies such as God or a sacred book); these powers undoubtedly interferes in fashioning the identities of the authors and readers. Laura Lungler Knoppers finds out that Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* "again powerfully shows how cultural and religious clashes produce seemingly unique selves" (128).

## 2. Conclusion

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* Greenblatt revolves around the main idea that all human activity is inevitably inscribed in a system of signification which organizes the ways people understand their world. In other words, he thinks that the Renaissance literature is inextricably related to the social practices in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, which picture the self as a culturally constituted entity shaped by structural authorities. Hans Bertens' suggestion in this respect is useful:

*Self-Fashioning* ultimately subscribes to the poststructuralist notion that the self is always a

construction, that our identity is never given, but always the product of an interaction between the way we want to represent ourselves – through the stories we tell (or the incidents we suppress) and our actual presentations – and the power relations we are part of.(179)

In conclusion, Greenblatt argues that the 'self' is not an independent entity, but rather a product of natural and social forces. Greenblatt focuses on the cultural constraints which repeatedly give the identity its shape and determine its beliefs.

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