

# Retrieving the Past—The Historical Theme in Penelope Lively’s Fictions

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**Abstract**—Penelope Lively (1933- ), the contemporary British writer, was first known mainly as a children’s writer prior to her winning the 1987 Booker Prize with her widely praised novel *Moon Tiger* (1987). *The Road to Lichfield*, published in 1977, is her first adult novel which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. *Treasures of Time* (1979), her second adult novel, was the winner of Great Britain’s first National Book Award for fiction in 1980 and the Arts Council National Book Award. In her literary fictions, Lively interweaves the present and the past -- history, the public, collective past, and memory, the private and personal past -- together with the application of various narrative techniques, such as flashback, stream of consciousness, psychological time, etc. A predominant theme running through her literary world is her consistent focus on history. This essay intend to study Penelope Lively’s understanding and interpretation of history, and draw this conclusion: Although a complete understanding of history is impossible, yet as we realize our subjectivity and misunderstanding of history we can try to understand it in a new way and integrate it into the present life.

**Index Terms**—Penelope Lively, history, new historicism

## I. INTRODUCTION

History used to be considered as single, unified, extra-textual real and an unmediated representation of events and reality. And the truth of an interpretation of a historical text can be guaranteed by its historical accuracy in the light of linguistic, cultural, social and political understanding of the period. However, in the postmodern era, history itself, the grand narrative, is no longer authoritative. Re-examination of history is fully reflected in the study of new historicists and post-modernists, such as Louis A. Montrose, Hayden White and Linda Hutcheon, etc. With the introduction of history into the study of literature, new historicists hold the view that “there is no single ‘history’, only discontinuous and contradictory ‘histories’.” (Selden, 2004, p.189) Randall Stevenson (1991) in *The Last of England* concludes that “questions about the reliability of historical narrative—or any narrative—extended much more widely towards the end of the 20th century.”(p.448) The postmodern uncertainties provoked the thinking of historians, literary critics, the academics and the writers worldwide. In the fictional world of Penelope Lively, similar revisionist views about history are also demonstrated.

Penelope Lively is an outstanding contemporary British writer who has published 17 fictions to date. And her predominant fictional techniques are “the psychological layering of recollection, imagination, flashback and shifting viewpoint.”(Hearne, 1999, p.1) Lively first achieved success with her children's works and she began to write novels for adults in 1977. Her first adult novel, *The Road to Lichfield*, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. *Treasures of Time* (1979) is her second adult novel and she won the Booker Prize with *Moon Tiger* (1987).

More and more scholars pay attention to Penelope Lively after her winning of the Booker Prize. Jane Langton lists all the literary works of Penelope Lively from 1970 to 1982 and introduces her literary works for both children and adults critically in DLB14 (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 14) drawing the conclusion that Lively’s books show her concern with the continuity of the past into the present, and the subtle relationship between collective memory and personal memory. Mary Hurley Moran’s *Penelope Lively* (1993) introduces Lively both from the perspective of her life and literary career and claims her critical interpretations to most of Lively’s adult fictions written before 1993. With her study of Penelope Lively Mary Hurley Moran concludes that one of Lively’s consistent theme is “the interactive relationship between the present and the past, both historical and personal.” (Moran, 1993, p.ix) Her discussion about history on *The Road to Lichfield* (1977), *Treasures of Time* (1979) and *Moon Tiger* (1988) provides good inspirations for this thesis. Then in 1997, Mary Hurley Moran’s “In The Novels of Penelope Lively: A Case for the Continuity of the Experimental Impulse in Postwar British Fiction” turns to discuss Lively’s modernist and postmodernist characteristics and she points out that “it is the skillful blending of the traditional and the experimental that accounts for Lively’s appeal.” (Moran, 1997, p.117) Debrah Raschke’s “Penelope Lively’s ‘Moon Tiger’: Re-envisioning a ‘History of the World’” focuses on the historical theme of *Moon Tiger*, while this thesis will try to find out Lively’s consistent views on history and memory. Betsy Hearne compares Lively’s fictions for children with her adult fictions in the essay “Across the Ages: Penelope Lively’s Fiction for Children and Adults” in 1999, and she also points out that Lively’s preoccupation with history has formed a central theme. In *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2005), Margaret Drabble again introduces Penelope Lively as a novelist and children’s writer and her recurrent theme is the intrusion of the past upon the present. All the studies on Penelope Lively indicate her historical theme but there is no

exact exploration on her historical theme. So this essay will focus on the historical theme on Lively's three literary novels—*The Road to Lichfield* (1977), *Treasures of Time* (1979) and *Moon Tiger* (1988).

## II. MISUNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY

Trained in the discipline of history in Oxford, Penelope Lively is noted to exhibit an acute sense of history in her writing and “her reading of history at the university determined the kind of fiction she would write.” (Moran, 1993, p.32) *The Road to Lichfield* is composed in the 1970s, when the Great Britain has lost old glories as the Great British Empire. Some British people cherished the memory of the good old days so they form the popularity of keeping the old things. Lively first shows her historical theme by inviting readers to sympathize with people with historical misunderstanding. Anne Linton of *The Road to Lichfield* is a member of a committee formed to prevent the destruction of Splatt's Cottage, which is an early fifteenth century farmhouse. All the members of this committee want to protect the cottage partly because it's posh to like old things, such as antique furniture, houses with beams everywhere, vintage cars and old maps. Owning old things shows you've got nice taste in that period. But Anne finds it is wrong when she discovers the cottage is in an advanced state of decay from dry rot and that the building site is slated for conversion to housing for the local elderly. Furthermore, Anne's skepticism of keeping this old cottage increases when she interviews Mr. Jewkes, the local planning officer, and realizes that his argument for the benefits of demolishing the cottage to replace it with low-cost housing for the elderly is much better thought out than the simplistic, emotional argument of the preservation committee. Anne finds herself agreeing with Mr. Jewkes. Mr. Jewkes recalls that “his grandparents had kept the cottage nice-looking, but cherished no illusions about living in a damp, inconveniently situated house with no running water.” (*The Road to Lichfield*, p.123-4) And Lively further satirizes the kind of naive historical nostalgia of the preservation committee by telling us that when the bulldozers reveal a shallow grave of abused children who died in Splatt's Cottage, the history of the cottage becomes an outright embarrassment. In this part Lively shows us that some people are influenced by the nostalgia and misunderstand the meaning of keeping the historical and old sites.

Another kind of misunderstanding of history which Lively reveals in *The Road to Lichfield* is that people superficially take history as entertainment. When Anne has her doubts about “the lessons of the past”, her lover David Fielding reacts:

“Another historian,” said David Fielding, “we're an unfashionable lot.”

“What do you mean?”

“The tide's against us, hadn't you noticed? People haven't got much time for the past nowadays. They want vocational instruction.”

“Oh, come,” she said. “I can't entirely agree with that. I should have thought it had never been more popular, literally popular. Cheap Book Club editions of history books all over the back of the Radio Times; millions of people tramping round stately homes every weekend; the last hundred years in some aspect or other being re-hashed on the telly every time you turn it on.”

“The past as entertainment.” (ibid, p.28)

Furthermore, Lively shows us that one reason of this kind of misunderstanding of history is that people have been influenced by the contemporary tendency to regard history as quaint, thereby distorting and diminishing it. In *The Road to Lichfield*, Anne's media mogul brother glibly describes to her the eight-episode “historical soap-opera” about Sir Walter Raleigh he is producing: the Tower of London is “just handy as a central theme—you know, take something solid like a place and watch history seething around it and all that, it's a good device, gives us scope to bring in just about everything. Good old bread-and-butter costume drama, everybody loves it.” (ibid, p.198) Viewing the filming of one of these historical soap-operas, Anne witnesses the absurdity and superficiality of this approach because the directors and camera crew focus more on image than substance, and their jargon-laden commands continually interrupt the actors' dialogues. By describing this scene, Penelope Lively reveals that by distorting and diminishing history in the present the facts of history are more inaccessible.

In *Treasures of Time* (1979), Penelope Lively also portrays a character just like Anne's brother. Tony Greenway in *Treasures of Time*, a BBC producer who cashes in on the past, shows us the distortion and diminishment of history too. When Tony Greenway goes to Danehurst to do a program of Charlie's Tump, the site of the famous excavation, he is interested in the excavation and other historical episodes only insofar as he can use them for his program. The most cogent way Lively exposes the superficiality and distortion of television's treatment of historically important subjects is her presentation of the actual filming of the documentary. As Tony Greenway is about to shoot the Charlie's Tump scene he declares to himself that “the joy of filming is that anything can always be made to appear otherwise,” he goes about positioning the camera so as to rule out any ingredients in the landscape that would contradict the bucolic “uninhabited effect” he is contriving. (*Treasures of Time*, p.193) A few weeks later, Tom Rider, the protagonist, views Tony's documentary on television with his parents and his parents buy into the illusion completely, murmuring the remarks like “Lovely country” and “Look at those wild flowers.” (ibid, p.214) Tom Rider, however, reflects ironically on the realities that have excluded: “inharmonious items like the BBC cars and the barbed-wire fence and people and dead sheep.” (ibid, p.214)

Another reason for misunderstanding of the past, as Moran observes of Lively's works, attributes to the “subjective and culturally conditioned” way we view history. (Moran p.43) In *Treasures of Time* Lively sets all the main characters

as people who work hard to see the past clearly, history-majored student, Tom Rider, and archaeologist, Hugh Paxton. Tom attempts to look at the world through William Stukekey's eyes by immersing himself in the man's life, relishing in particular the homely and commonplace details he sometimes unearths in Stukely's diaries and Tom feels that "it's knowing that kind of thing that makes this kind of thing seem slightly less of a fantasy than it does a lot of the time." (*Treasures of Time*, p.11) Tom shares the same way with the new historicists to present the past. According to New Historicism, the published history books are written by persons from the ruling class, so these books can not reflect the true history. For these reasons, New Historicism turns its focus to anecdotes, folklore, legends and unofficial history books from those marginalized classes and groups. By doing so, new historicists think they can present the truth of the past. Tom shows that we can never truly grasp the way people of the past experienced the world, and when he composes his doctoral thesis he says:

"I know a great deal about Stukeley; I probably know more about Stukeley than anybody else in the world; I know where he was on April 4, 1719, and I know who his friend were and in what language he addressed them and I know the broad course of his life the day he was born till the day he died. The real Stukeley, of course, is effectively concealed by two hundred and fifty years of gathering confusion and conflicting interpretations of how the world may have appeared to other people. The real breathing feeling cock-and balls prick-me-and-I-bleed Stukeley is just about as inaccessible as the Neanderthal man." (ibid, p.10-1)

By describing Tom Rider's progress of writing his doctoral thesis and his thoughts during the writing Lively shows us that our view is inevitably shaped by current historical theory, by cultural biases and assumptions, even by our own emotional needs, which is also the viewpoint of new historicism. Hayden White, a famous historian and philosopher, one of the most influential figures of new historicism, points out that historical work is "a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose." (White, 1973, p. ix) That is to say history writing inevitably has an element of fictionality. A historian "performs an essentially poetic act, in which he prefigures the historical field and constitutes it as a domain 'what was really happening' in it." (White p. ix) According to White, historians construct the historical past by choosing and organizing historical events in the form of a meaningful story. Linda Hutcheon echoes: "We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts." (Hutcheon, 1988, p.45) And Raman Selden states "the past is not something which confronts us as if it were a physical object, but is something we construct from already written texts of all kinds of which we construe in line with our particular historical concerns." (Selden, 2004, p.188) According to these academics, there is no unified, grand history but histories narrated by historians with subjective choice and propensity to satisfy his or her own ideological and political prejudice and preference and nobody can transcend the historical situation.

Through her literary fictions Lively tries to reveal that history is misunderstood because we always distort and diminish history for different kinds of purposes, such as entertainment, earning money, etc. Lively's revelation of the misunderstanding of history in her literary works reminds us that "the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them." (Montrose, qtd. in Vesser, 1989, p.20)

### III. RETRIEVING HISTORY

In *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture*, Louis A. Montrose's explains that "By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them." (Montrose, qtd. in Vesser, 1989, p.20) Louise A. Motrose means that all the texts are part of the history. Literary works should not be regarded as sublime and transcendent expressions of the human spirit, but as texts among other texts. Since a literary text is situated in the institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the overall culture of a particular time and place, the text can partly consist the history of that era. And Selden concludes that "nonliterary" texts produced by lawyers, popular writers, theologians, scientists and historians should not be treated as belonging to a different order of textuality. (Selden, 2004, p.188)

In her literary fictions Penelope Lively shows us several parts of history which can help us retrieve the history of that era according to Louis A. Montrose's "historicity of texts".

Firstly, Penelope Lively retrieves history from the perspective of a history teacher. This segment of history in *The Road to Lichfield* is a part of history of Anne Linton, a forty-years-old history teacher and housewife, who becomes jobless because the comprehensive where she teaches eliminates the O-level History for more relevant social-science option. Born in 1933, Penelope Lively is the daughter of wartime and its consequent austerity has great influence to her literary creation. Lively grew up with images of ruin and destruction, and came of age as a novelist in the two decades during which England undertook to redesign itself through radical reforms: the welfare state, the comprehensive education movement. Susan Keen describes "in the 1970s and early 1980s school history did suffer from comparisons to social-science subjects and practical, vocational training, even as proponents of new methodologies attempted to break away from traditional teaching methods emphasizing facts and chronology." (Keen, 2001, p.101) Lively retrieves the social history of the 1970s through a history teacher who subverts the macro-narration of history and shows her notion that there is no single history, only discontinuous and contradictory histories.

And in *Moon Tiger*, there are two cruel historical events. One is the Second World War and the other is the Hungarian

Revolution of 1956. Through Claudia Hampton, the protagonist, and her lover Tom Southern Lively describes W. W. II. Claudia is a well-known author of popular history books and a journalist with a reputation for grittily honest articles and she meets Tom Southern, a British tank commander, on a foray into the desert to witness the aftermath of the Western Desert Campaign. The day Claudia and Tom meet, they stop the jeep and Claudia wanders to where an armored car has hit a mine. She walks quickly down to the wreckage and sees: "The man is lying face down. His hair is fair, his tin hat lies beside him, part of his head is in black bloody sheds, the sand too is blackened, one leg has no foot. Flies crawl in glittery masses." (*Moon Tiger*, p.98-9) And as she looks at all this she hears a noise from the other side of the smashed car. She steps round and sees: "There is another shattered body but this body moves. Its hand lifts from its chest and the falls back. Its mouth opens and makes a sound." (ibid, p.98-9). By describing the vivid scene in W. W. II from the perspective of the soldiers, Lively deconstructs the grand narration of the historical event and interprets history as the discontinuous and contradictory "histories". Just as Tom says to Claudia:

"Wars have little to do with justice. Or valour or sacrifice or the other things traditionally associated with them. That's one thing I hadn't quite realized. War has been much misrepresented, believe me. It's had a disgracefully good press. I hope you and your friends are doing something to put that right." (ibid, p.111)

Lively shows us history is misrepresented by creating Tom's words as "War has been much misrepresented." (ibid, p.111)

Another historical event Lively mentions in *Moon Tiger* is the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Laszlo is a young Hungarian who studies art in London, and Claudia writes denouncing the Soviet takeover of Hungary, is a key person in Claudia's life. Laszlo's father gets wind of Claudia's article and, inferring rightly that Claudia is a sympathetic liberal, telephones from Budapest begging her to look up his son and warn him against returning home. Claudia invites Laszlo to her flat, sees what sorry straits he is in, and extends the invitation to a few days. This gradually turns into a long-term arrangement, with Claudia becoming something of a mentor and surrogate mother to Laszlo over the years. Lively chooses to reflect the Hungarian Revolution from the perspective of Laszlo, the victim, which shows her deconstruction of the grand history and her interpretation of the discontinuous and contradictory history.

*Moon Tiger* underscores even more ambitiously a rich polyphonic history by composing a history from the perspective of Claudia Hampton, a female historian who uses emotional tone and the chaotic organization to write Cortez, Napoleon, and other historical personages. On one hand, in the traditional way, history must be a linear sequence of critical public events and the historian analyzed the events from the objective vantage point. But Claudia Hampton believes that it is more authentic to present history as chaos and confusion than to impose a shape on it. She wants to shake people free from the perceptions of historical events they have been molded to have. According to White's assumption the historical documents are not the exact fact which the past really happens in that way. The history is not something which confronts us as if it were a physical object, but is something we construct from already written texts of all kinds of which we construe in line with our particular historical concerns. The historiographer always suppressed and subordinated some voices and facts in the history and highlighted certain of them to make up the historical story according to their subjective understanding. At the beginning of the novel, Claudia is lying in the bed and composes her history of the world. She not only subverts the macro-narration of history by writing a world history from her perspective but also makes her history disordered. When she was young Claudia had a nearly incestuous liaison with her brother; She keeps a casual sexual relationship with the father of her child. She frequently ignores her daughter for her career. Penelope Lively composes Claudia's life as disordered to subvert the continuous and ordered history and retrieve the history to its disordered and chaotic nature. On the other hand, in old historicism, the female is out of the public history. By composing history from the female perspective, Penelope Lively shows her subversion of the grand narration too.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Through the above analysis, we can find that Penelope Lively reveals the misunderstanding of history in her literary works and retrieves history from different perspectives of her literary characters. The new historicists, who challenge and violate the strict boundary between history and fiction, reveal the narrated nature of history and points out the past can never be available to us in pure form. And Linda Hutcheon echoes that as discourse history can never be truly grasp. The history can never be fully clear to us so is the present. Penelope Lively shows the same view through her literary works.

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