

Lecture 07

Neo-classical Literary Theory

Hello everyone and welcome back to another lecture on Literary Theory. As you know, we had ended our previous lecture on Longinus's theory of the sublime by noting how similarities may be drawn between the notion of sublime and the Romantic Movement. But before we move on to discuss the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, we would have to dwell upon the story of preceding hundred years. This is because it was during these hundred years which roughly spans from the late seventeenth to late eighteenth century that we see the emergence of an attempt to theorize literature within the field of English literary studies.

Now this might sound like a controversial statement so let me elaborate. It was during this period between late seventeenth and eighteenth century that English literature gradually became a subject of critical interest and scholarly discussion. It is important to note here that English literary studies as an institutionalized academic discipline would not be established till the nineteenth century. The late seventeenth and eighteenth century emergence of English literary studies was not connected with academic institutions but rather with what is known as the growth of the public sphere in Britain. It is within this public sphere that English literature first started being discussed in a comprehensive and coherent manner. The development of literary theory vis-à-vis English literary studies was at the heart of this eighteenth century enterprise to engage with literature in general and English literature in particular in a systematic matter.

Emergence of literature

In today's lecture we will discuss how the emergence of a public sphere in Britain gave rise to English literary studies as a new field of discourse. We will also discuss how this in turn was connected with the development of the first set of critical theories that was inherently connected to English literary studies – a set of theories that are today identified with by the name neoclassical literary theories. But I want to open this discussion by looking at the term literature itself. Here I would like to reiterate some of the things that I have already mentioned in my first lecture in this series. Literature which has its roots in the Latin word *littera* was associated in English till the sixteenth century with the notion of literacy – the ability to read. Ever since Caxton established the first printing press in Britain in the fifteenth century printed books started becoming more and more available thereby making the ability to read printed material one of the predominant signs of literacy. Literature even today retains this strong link to the ability to read printed books. Indeed, this is precisely why oral forms of literature are regarded as a kind of special or even marginal category within the field of literature.

Furthermore, in an age where drives to achieve mass literacy where unheard of, the ability to read was a sign of accomplishment that could only be achieved by a leisured class who would undergo a fairly prolonged training in order to achieve literacy. The ability to read also had a

limited class base because reading material including printed books was only available to a very few.

Thus by the eighteenth century, literature was firmly connected to the idea of social distinction. Literature, at least in the sense in which it was associated with literacy and printed books, was an activity that was far removed from the peasants' world of back-breaking manual labour. Acquaintance with literature was therefore a sign of belonging to the upper echelons of a class based society. But who constituted these upper echelons of the society? In the Britain of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the answer to this question was fast changing.

Seventeenth century political change

In the 1640s England had experienced a bloody civil war which had culminated in the beheading of King Charles the first and the establishment of a republican state. This had led a severe blow to the existing power structure of the society in which the long entrenched aristocrats headed by an absolutist monarch held complete sway over the affairs of the state. The bourgeoisie as a distinct class was making their presence felt on the political arena through trying to establish the primacy of the parliament over the arbitrary diktats of a monarch. And the establishment of a republic in 1649 significantly tilted the scales towards their favour.

The gains of the civil war was retained by the bourgeoisie and even further enhanced through the glorious revolution in 1688 which returned Britain to the monarchical form of government with a significant difference. William and Mary who were made the new monarchs of Britain following the Glorious Revolution were also administered a coronation oath in which they had to swear that they would govern according to the statutes and laws that have been discussed and agreed upon in the Parliament. The new center of power was therefore no longer the court of an autocrat where the voice of one man reigned supreme over all other voices. Rather the site of true power became the parliament where the members conversed as equals and not as subordinates.

This spirit of holding a discussion among equals which informed and indeed still informs the idea of a parliament was replicated in eighteenth century more locally by such informal gathering places like clubs, coffee shops and chocolate houses. These were the places which formed what is known as the bourgeois public sphere in Britain. And it is in this broader story of the rise of the bourgeois politics and bourgeois public sphere that we can locate the emergence of English literary studies and its quest to develop a coherent theoretical discourse about literature.

Here, however, I need to clarify something. In British literary history, every major socio-political change has resulted in the creation or adaptation of some new kind of literature or the other. For instance, the Norman conquest of England in 1066 resulted in a great social as well as political shake up of the country and as a direct result of it we see the emergence of the metrical romances which occupies such a crucial place in the medieval literary history of Britain. Similarly, the rise of the bourgeoisie in Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth century also brought with a new form of literature – the novel. But my focus in this lecture is not the rise of this new

bourgeois form of literature but rather the rise of a new bourgeois form of looking at literature, of studying it, and of talking about it. What is unique and unprecedented here is therefore not the development of a new literary genre but rather the development of a shared parameter for critically judging literature as an art form within the general field of English literary studies. In the rest of the lecture I will talk about two things. First, I am going to talk about the idea of public sphere, what it means, and what was the kind of public sphere that we see developing in Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The second thing that I am going to elaborate is the kind of literary theory that this British public sphere gave rise to and why it is referred to by the term neoclassical.

Public Sphere

So to begin with the idea of public sphere, it is a term that is strongly associated with the work of the German intellectual Jürgen Habermas. In his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Habermas describes public sphere as constituted by social institutions which provides a platform for debates and discussions through which public opinion is shaped. If we look around us, we can see numerous instances of such platforms of open public debates and discussions ranging from the village squares to the television studio. These social institutions become especially relevant within a democratic political structure because in such a political system, it is the public opinion shaped through such open debates that determine the shape and function of the government. In the Western world, the public sphere became more and more important as feudalism gave way to more democratic structures of governance. For Britain, more specifically, the social institutions constituting a public sphere of debate, discussion and opinion making became significant from the late seventeenth century onwards following the beheading of the absolutist King Charles and subsequently through the assertion of the Parliament's supremacy.

Enlightenment

Now this public sphere which came to prominence mainly during the eighteenth century had two very strong influences. The first was that of Enlightenment and the second was of capitalism. Enlightenment which swept through Western Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth century prioritized rationality and foregrounded the ability of human reasoning to make sense of the world around us. God or the faith in divine authority was no longer called upon to explain human existence or the universal order which framed that existence. The privileging of the "rational", formed a key aspect of the eighteenth century public sphere.

If we consider the court of a monarch, it is the voice of one person which has absolute sway over all the other voices because the voice of the monarch is considered to be divinely guided. The monarch does not need to convince others through reasoning. His words are taken for granted simply because he is the monarch and is situated at the top of a hierarchical social and political pyramid where unquestioning obedience is the norm. If you compare this to the public sphere informed by the values of Enlightenment, you will see that public opinion is shaped by people

who appeals to the reasoning faculty of their fellow participants. Unlike the court, the members of the public sphere are perceived by each other as equals. And the argument or opinion of one member can only trump that of another if they are perceived as more rational. This privileging of rationality like all the other forms of discourse emerging from within this public sphere also influenced the discourse of neoclassical literary theory. Thus we find John Dryden, one of the most influential British poets and literary theorists of the second half of the seventeenth century argue in his work “Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy” that literary criticism should be “founded upon good sense and sound reason, rather than on authority”.

Capitalism

Now let us come to the influence of capitalism on the emerging public sphere of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. As noted earlier, the institutions that made up the public sphere replaced the monarch’s courts as the site for social, political and economic discourse formation. And whereas the courts were the domain of the aristocrats, the institutions of the public sphere were primarily the domain of the bourgeoisie whom the growth of capitalism had pushed forward. Thus, the public sphere that emerged in Britain during the period under discussion was primarily a bourgeois public sphere. And it was informed through and through by the economic and political interests of the bourgeois class. But the discourses that took shape within the bourgeois public sphere were not merely limited to the economic and the political. The public sphere was also used by the emerging bourgeois to shape a cultural world-view which was in sync with their economic and political interests. It was as part of this broader bourgeois cultural project that we see the development in Britain of the field of English literary studies and the associated field of literary theory.

Addison and Steele

From this general discussion of context within which Neoclassical literary theory emerged, let us now move to some specific aspects of this theory. As I have explained while discussing the etymology and the development of the term literature within English language, engagement with literary texts was associated during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century with cultural taste. Possessing or reading literature signified a degree of cultural sophistication which supposedly distinguished the new bourgeois from the peasants and the industrial labourers. The attempts to critically engage with literature, was perceived by the bourgeoisie as the mark of an elevated social status that was earlier exclusively enjoyed by the aristocrats. During this period we therefore see the emergence of a literary theory that is deeply concerned with the issue of developing cultural refinement and social sophistication. Clear instances of this is provided by the early eighteenth century journals like *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. Richard Steele and Joseph Addison used these journals highly effectively to instruct the bourgeois readership on what literature to read in order to develop a cultural taste that would distinguish them as gentlemen.

Now it is important to note that in the matter of judging good and proper literature and developing refined cultural taste through it, the literary theorists of the bourgeois public sphere relied upon the classical literary and theoretical texts. This was primarily because the value of the classical texts was established beyond any doubt. This means that the key classical texts that we have discussed in our previous lectures like for instance *Poetics* by Aristotle or *On the Sublime* by Pseudo-Longinus formed a sort of template on which the new kind of English literary theory was scripted. It is for this reason that the literary criticism that emerged during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century within the bourgeois public sphere is referred to as Neoclassical Literary Criticism.

Literary Rules

Now one of the chief ways in which literary theorists of the bourgeois public sphere were using the classical texts was by using them as repositories of stylistic decorum and literary rules and conventions. The works of Aristotle, Horace or Longinus were being used to formulate a set of literary dos and don'ts which could then be applied to either produce new literary works which were good and proper or to judge existing literary works. Indeed, for the eighteenth century British poet and theorist Alexander Pope these rules which he could find in the classical texts went beyond the issue of stylistic decorum. According to Pope, the literary conventions devised by the classical author were a reflection of the rules that underline nature itself. So for a literary critic or an author, acquaintance with these classical rules were not simply a matter of cultural taste but also a matter of the truthful reflection of nature and man's place within it. As Pope writes in his *Essay on Man*: "Those Rules of old *discover'd*, not *devis'd*, / Are *Nature* still, but *Nature Methodiz'd*". Then again a few lines later we find this piece of advice for both the author and the critic: "Learn hence for Ancient *Rules* a just Esteem; / To copy *Nature* is to copy *Them*". It is however important to note that these rules and conventions which the neoclassical theorists culled from the texts of their classical predecessors did not evoke an unquestioning admiration. Take for instance the rule of the three dramatic unities. This rule which enjoyed a great degree of popularity among seventeenth and eighteenth century theorists stated that any play in order to attain the elevated stature of a classical Greek drama needs to abide by three things: first it needs to have unity of place and confine the actions to a single location; second it needs to have unity of time and resist any attempt to randomly jump forward or backward in time; and thirdly it needs to have unity of action where the plot remains uncontaminated by any subplots that might divert the audience from the main story. Now, though many neoclassical theorists believed in the sanctity of these rules, there were also others who questioned them by pitching against these rules the plays of Shakespeare which regularly violate each of these three unities. Thus, though on the one hand we have someone like Pope who insists that we learn "a just Esteem" for the Ancient rules, on the other hand we have a text like Dryden's *Essay on Criticism* where the matter of following rules and conventions of the classical authors is placed within the structure of a rational debate. And in many ways Dryden's text is perhaps more representative of the spirit of open debate that informed the bourgeois public sphere than Pope's admonitions to follow the

rules laid down by the ancient. But in spite of acknowledging this diversity there is no denying the fact that an excessive concern with rules, conventions and stylistic decorum occupied the neoclassical literary theory of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. This concern was finally to be displaced by the emergence of a radically new conceptualization of literature within the field of English studies during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It is to this new conceptualization of literature that we would turn in our next lecture where we will begin with our discussion of Romanticism.