

Lecture 23

Marxist Literary Theory III: Raymond Williams

Hello friends. This will be our concluding lecture on Marxist Literary Theory. And our primary focus today will be on the theoretical perspective provided by the British academic Raymond Williams. So to start with let's familiarize ourselves with some of the biographical details of Raymond Williams.

Raymond Williams

Williams was born in 1921, in a village situated at the border between England and Wales, to working-class parents. This location of his birth and childhood would play a significant role in shaping his ideas as a theorist as well as a literary artist. Thus for instance this rural location situated at a grey zone between England and Wales will return again and again as a major thematic concern in his novels, starting with his first novel titled *Border Country* and continuing down to his last novel titled *People of the Black Mountains*. The physical location of his childhood village would also give him an entry point to study and theorise the key distinction between the rural countryside and the city that had informed, for centuries, the British cultural imagination. This particular aspect of Williams's scholarship is most evident in the book, *The Country and the City*, which is arguably one of the finest texts of literary/ cultural criticism produced from within the Anglophone world in the twentieth century.

Apart from the physical location of Williams' childhood, the political and cultural influence that surrounded him in his growing up years also had a profound impact on his scholarship. As I have just stated, Williams was born and brought up within a working-class culture and this connected him from very early on with the British labour politics and with Marxism. His association with

Marxism deepened as a student in the University of Cambridge where he was a leading member of the Socialist Club. And finally it flourished into a profusion of important theoretical writings like *Culture and Society*, *The Long Revolution*, *The Country and the City* which I have already mentioned, and *Marxism and Literature* all of which redefined the relevance of Marx's ideas in understanding literature in particular and culture in general. By the time Williams died in 1988, he had not only transformed the field of Marxist literary theory but also inaugurated the vibrant new field of cultural studies.

Dominant, Residual, and Emergent

Now the particular theoretical idea by Williams that we are going to discuss today is the concept called **structure of feeling** which he first introduced in his book *Preface to Film* (1954) and which he then went on developing throughout his life, trying to rephrase it again and again in works like *The Long Revolution* and *Marxism and Literature*. As this long preoccupation with the idea suggests, Williams considered it to be a key concept which required regular reiteration. But in spite of Williams writing about it in a number of his books, structure of feeling remains a rather complex idea and so we will try and approach it step by step by taking as our point of departure the Gramscian idea of hegemony with which we had concluded our last lecture.

Now in our previous discussion we have noted that hegemony is a form of control that the dominant class exercises over the society at large by transforming their particular ideology into something like a consensus worldview. It operates by convincing most of the society that the dominant ideology presents the most natural way of conceptualizing the world around and one's individual position within it. In other words, hegemony is achieved through the naturalization and universalization of a dominant ideology and a dominant culture. Williams complicates the study of this dominant ideology by arguing that in any society and at any given point in time, the

dominant ideology is situated in a state of tension with two other forms of ideology or culture. The first he calls the residual culture and the second he calls the emergent culture. So what is residual ideology or residual culture? Well, Williams points out that each dominant ideological formation becomes dominant by replacing an existing set of dominant ideological formation. So for instance the bourgeois ideology of the capitalist mode of production became hegemonic only after replacing the dominance of the feudal ideology. Now with hegemonic ascendancy of the bourgeois ideology, most of the parts of the feudal ideology altogether disappeared, but not all. Some elements of the past ideological formation remained active even within the era of the bourgeois dominance. Take for instance the survival of the monarchy in Britain even in an age when the dominant bourgeois ideology supports the political form of parliamentary democracy. These surviving parts of an older ideology and the culture of an older social order is what Williams characterizes by the label “residual”.

Now here Williams makes a distinction between the “residual” and what he calls the “archaic”. He writes that the “archaic” is that “which is wholly recognized as an element of the past, to be observed, to be examined, or even on occasion to be consciously revived, in a deliberately specializing way”. In contrast to this, William writes,

The residual has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institutions or formation.

Now as far as the residual elements are concerned, Williams makes a further distinction which I think is very important. He argues that some parts of the residual elements are absorbed by dominant ideology and made part of the dominant culture. But some parts of the residual ideology still remain outside the purview of the dominant ideology and present a set of meanings and values that are alternative and oppositional to the dominant ideology. Organized religion for instance is a typical example of the residual ideology within a post-Enlightenment bourgeois world order. Now an organized religion like Christianity is partly appropriated by the dominant bourgeois culture and indeed, as the sociologist Max Weber shows in his classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* at least one version of Christianity has provided the basis for the bourgeois value system. But then again Christianity also stresses certain aspects like for instance service to others without reward which opposes the logic of market place that underlines the bourgeois ideology. Thus, it is possible to use this particular aspect of the residual ideology – the aspect of service without reward -- to conceive an alternative social order where each of us will produce use value for others according to our own capacity without worrying about its exchange value as well as the possible profit that can be derived out of it. This will immediately put at risk the entire workings of the capitalist system. This shows how parts of the unabsorbed residual ideology can pose a risk to the dominant ideology.

Now let us come to the emergent ideology which is slightly more complex to define than the residual element. According to Williams, the emergent ideology is the sum total of all the “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships” that keeps emerging within a social order and positing itself as an alternative or in opposition to the dominant ideology. Now the problem here is, as Williams points out, that:

it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture [...] and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it; emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel.

This difficulty is compounded by the fact that just like the residual element, the emergent element within a particular social order transacts with the dominant ideology and the dominant culture. Thus, for instance, parts of the emergent ideology which might initially show potential to pose an alternative or to oppose the dominant culture may subsequently be appropriated by the dominant ideology and made a part of it. Yet in spite of this regular appropriation of the parts of the emergent by the dominant, genuinely new meanings, values, practices, and social relationships do emerge in every society and they are mostly associated with the emergence of a new class. So for instance, if we trace the European history from the late medieval ages to the seventeenth century we will witness the gradual but steady emergence of a genuinely new set of meanings, practices and social relationships associated with the emergent bourgeois class which can be regarded as “substantially alternative and oppositional” to the dominant feudal culture. And by the eighteenth century of course it would be the bourgeois ideology and the bourgeois culture that would come to occupy the dominant position.

However, Williams also points out that though the emergence of a new class is what is usually most strongly associated with the emergent ideology, there can be other sources of the emergent elements within a society that is not directly related to the ideology of any particular emergent class. So what is this other source of the emergent? Williams states that “no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention”. In other words, there are areas of human life which are at any given point in time outside the grip of the dominant

ideology which is informed by the dominant mode of production. This is a very interesting statement to be made by a scholar working from within the Marxist tradition. What Williams is stating here is the possibility of areas in human life that cannot be reduced down even in its last instance to the dominant mode of production. This seemingly contradicts the base and superstructure model where every aspect of human life and human consciousness is seen as being determined in its last instance by the base of the mode of production that dominates a particular era. But as we have already seen with Althusser, the base and superstructure model is too crude in its deterministic argument and needs to be revised and nuanced further. In any case, Williams identifies these human practices, energies and intentions that are not already claimed or exhausted by the dominant ideology as the source for the production of genuinely emergent ideology which can bring to the foreground alternative or oppositional meanings and values.

Now here we need to note something. The area of human life which is beyond the clutches of the dominant is a grey area because it is the site that holds within itself two things simultaneously: a) the residual ideology and culture that has not been appropriated by the dominant and b) the emergent meanings and values which can provide genuine alternative or opposition to the dominant ideology. This means that just like transactional relationship that the dominant culture shares individually with the residual and the emergent, the residual and the emergent too share a transactional relationship with each other. This, therefore, creates highly intricate networks of relationship between the various kinds of worldviews and social and cultural elements which cannot be reduced to the deterministic framework provided by a particular mode of production or the hegemony of its dominant ideology.

Structure of feeling

Now Williams argues that this dynamic network of the residual, the dominant and the emergent ideology translates into a complex lived experience which he describes through the phrase “structure of feeling”. The actual process of living through a particular time does not involve experiencing the residual, dominant and emergent as separate chunks of socio-cultural values. Rather at any given point in time these elements are in a state of solution and are experienced in the form of a totality. It is this experienced form of reality or, as Williams calls, it the structure of feeling that informs any particular work of art including literature produced during a particular period; which means that no literary text can be pinned down as the representation of a purely dominant ideology or a purely emergent ideology. What a piece of literature presents is a complex totality within which a number of ideological elements are in a state of dynamic interaction with each other. In Williams’s own words:

[I]t seems to be true, from the nature of art, that it is from such a totality that the artist draws; it is in art primarily, that the effect of a lived experience is expressed and embodied. To relate a work of art to any part of that whole may, in varying degrees, be useful; but it is a common experience, in analysis, to realize that when one has measured the work against the separable parts, there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. It is this, in the first instance, that I mean by the structure of feeling.

The work of a Marxist literary critic like Williams therefore involves engaging with this structure of feeling and its nuanced interrelationship. This results in a very different kind of literary analyses than the one produced by a critic who is working from within the base and superstructure model where every aspect of a literary text is sought to be connected with an external counterpart in the dominant mode of production. However, as with our previous

lectures, we do not have sufficient scope to discuss how Williams's theory can be put into practice. But if you are interested to know more about how Williams's notion of structure of feeling can be used as a tool for literary criticism I would recommend his book *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* apart from of course the classic text *The Country and the City*. So with this, I conclude our discussion on Marxism and Marxist literary theory. In our next lecture we will start exploring the works of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalytic literary criticism.