

**THEORY OF CULTURE: T.S. ELIOT, MATTHEW ARNOLD AND RAYMOND WILLIAMS**

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**Abstract**

*The nexus between culture and literature is as old as human civilization itself. From the days of Plato and Aristotle, down to the present day Culture Studies and its representative voices like Harold Bloom and Wayne Booth, the discourse has seen an explosion of sorts. At present, its connection with traditional cultural studies has been reduced to minimum yet the social implications of the concept remain. The present paper aims at formulating a general theory of culture in relation to literary criticism. The paper approaches culture through Christian, Liberal Humanist and Marxist points of view assuming their representatives respectively in the personas of T.S. Eliot, Matthew Arnold and Raymond Williams. The paper highlights the differences in their approaches while connecting them with the socio-economic and literary background of the ages they belonged to. Further, the paper takes up Eliot, Arnold and Williams separately delineating carefully their peculiar approaches to culture as a product in time and a process in history.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Cultural Studies, Marxism, Liberal Humanism, Christianity, Salvation and Renaissance.

The usage of the word culture can be commonly found in many discourses of sociology, politics, literature, ethics and religion. Naturally, its usage, which is obviously different in different contexts, evokes manifold and complex explanation and import. This complexity is further intensified by different interconnection of the concept of culture “according to whether we have in mind the development of an individual, of a group or class or of a whole society.” (Eliot, *Notes*21) Nevertheless, the use of the word culture, in all the discourses exploiting its offices, has remained more or less devoted to its etymological meaning. Its origin can be traced to the Latin word *cultura* which means ‘cultivation.’ Further, if one goes to the dictionary meaning of the word, one comes across some figurative meanings of the word: *improvement or refinement by education or training; the training or refinement of*

*mind, tastes and manners; the intellectual side of civilization.* The inference one draws for the human implication of these two statements is that culture refers to a suitable mental training and intellectual enlightenment. This would in turn enkindle a moral refinement of the human race and the whole process would ultimately enable an individual and, by implication, a group and a society to realize the potential latent in them. Finally, if the inference is to be connected to literary criticism, culture can be interpreted as a huge body of values manifested in and disseminated through the works of imaginative literature.

However, in literary criticism itself, the several concepts of culture have been in vogue that sum to form the theories of cultural criticism and Cultural Studies. Broadly, the cultural and literary history of the West is dominated and characterized by three theories of culture, stemming respectively from Christian theology, Liberal Humanism and Marxism which in itself brings forth rather, divergent uses and definitions of culture depending on which brand of Marxism is in question.

Applying a pure historical approach to culture, one finds that its traditional history in the West is dominated, more or less by Christian background. Before the flowering of Renaissance, Christian theology purely and completely dominated the cultural theories, however, after the Renaissance, the religious import declined partly, yet the presence remained forceful. Therefore, the concept of culture entertained by the Western mind that found a natural expression in its creative/imaginative literature is Christian that could be tracked right from the creative output of Chaucer through William Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson and S.T. Coleridge to the epic and colossal figure of T. S. Eliot in the twentieth century. However, the Christian theoretical explanation of culture found its most persuasive proclamation in T.S. Eliot, who is seen by many as the *messiah* of twentieth century. Eliot always upheld his strong commitment to the belief in the religious import and significance of all great literature. Accordingly, the theory of culture that he finally developed in *The Idea of a Christian Society* and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* as well as his poetry (*Ash Wednesday*, *Four Quartets*) and drama (the pageant play, *The Rock*, *Murder in the Cathedral*) is evidently Christian which he presented as the final corrective to the venom of secularism, individualism, democracy and modernity. Although one comes across some distinct liberal strains in Eliot's explanation of the issues and implications of Culture, yet he remains committed to an elitist view of culture which is essentially Christian.

As far as the Liberal Humanist concept of culture is concerned, it flourished under the influence of Renaissance. In the history of English Criticism, the first and foremost liberal voice begins to assert its impact with Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* later on heard again in Dr. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. We hear it much more clearly from a deeply religious

thinker, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his distinguished friend and contemporary, William Wordsworth. Both of them lay stress upon what Coleridge calls “the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity.” (Coleridge 42-43.) Though P.B. Shelley’s thought is characterized by an overweening social concern, he also stressed in most vehement terms the cultural significance of art and its liberating and humanizing influence on man.

All the same, it was in the Victorian era, in the assertive voice of Matthew Arnold that one comes across the most conscious and more or less unmixed liberal cultural concerns. His commitment to culture is a thriving living force in both his creative as well as non-creative work. Hailed unanimously by many as the prophet of the age he belonged to, Arnold’s work revolves round his theory of culture that he propounded as the means of salvation for the people steeped in doubt and despair. Arnold’s theory found a direct and true follower in F.R. Leavis who emphasized upon the morally edifying aspect of literature. Leavis also stressed upon the educating role of literature by virtue of which it nurtures human values. Later on the legacy of this tradition found its takers, in their own unique ways, in the works of Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More and Lionel Trilling.

The Marxist theories of culture are mainly connected to the base and the superstructure equation propounded by what is commonly described as vulgar Marxism the representatives of which could be seen in the towering figures like, Marx, Engels, Christopher Caudwell and their followers. According to the equation, the components of the superstructure do not have an independent existence and are directly seen as the products of the economic base which functions on an ideological level. In the Marxist theories of culture, culture too is a process that is changing with the change in the economic base. Culture in all its forms is seen as a mirror to the economic equations and the resultant social and class interests.

However, more emancipated and the Marxist critics and thinkers with poststructuralist undertones to their thought grant a relative autonomy to culture and cultural processes. Though they would agree with vulgar Marxist premise that culture is a product of social and economic processes and ought to be utilized for the same. All the same, in the Marxist theoretical paradigm, the definition of culture is as diverse as are the schools of Marxism. For instance, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci and the New Historicists are essentially Marxists yet in spite of ideological homogeneity, they differ on points of detail in their views on culture.

T.S. Eliot, Matthew Arnold and Raymond Williams are considered respectively to be the representative figures of the three theories of culture delineated above, namely Christian, Liberal Humanist and Marxist. Highly influenced by his authoritarian French tutor, Irving

Babbitt, Eliot's social preferences derive sustenance from his anti-liberalist stance in life. He denied any perfectibility to man and society and also rejected the belief in man's control over shaping the society on his own. In this, he was joined by T.E. Hulme who stressed upon the need of an external authority to regulate the social conduct of man. Hulme writes:

Man is essentially limited and imperfect. He is endowed with Original Sin. While he can occasionally accomplish acts which partake of perfection, he can never himself be perfect. As man is essentially bad, he can only accomplish anything of value by discipline—ethical and political. Order is thus not only negative, but creative and liberating. Institutions are necessary. (47)

Eliot brought his age to the self-awareness of the prevalent cultural crises. In "The Waste Land" and "Gerontion" he dramatized the spiritual bankruptcy of the inhabitants of the "unreal city" of London when even "April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire, stirring/ Dull roots with spring rain." (Rainey 57) and "The river sweats/ Oil and tar" (65). Pitting humanism against Christianity, he finds humanism occasional and periodical while Christianity a continuous historical fact. He considers humanism as a rowdy and riotous phenomenon in an otherwise real and smooth Western tradition of Christianity that he characterized by the term, "dissociation of sensibility" (*Selected Essays* 247) brought about by the disruptive influence of the Neo-classical and the Romantic movements in the English poetic tradition. He strongly believed and asserted that "the religious habits of the race are still very strong, in all places, at all times, and for all people. There is no humanistic habit: humanism is, I think, merely the state of mind of a few persons in a few places at a few times." (385).

In his work, Eliot professes his intention "to expose the essential relation of culture to religion." (Chinitz 89) Eliot's understanding of culture requires an individual to be conscious of the humanist, individual, anthropological, collective and the international definitions of culture. In his most powerful treatise on culture, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, Eliot proposes that culture of a people should exclusively be seen as the incarnation of its religion. But it does not mean that he narrows down the importance of culture to only the devout. Culture, he says, is shaped by all but in the end and in indirect ways, the quality of a given culture is subject to the character of its religion. Mattheissen points out, while Eliot "holds on consistently to his conviction that religion is primary, he always keeps a clear eye and open mind for the varieties and contradictions of art and life." (203)

Eliot may not come across as a direct commentator of religion but he makes sure that his comments on literature as well as culture fall in line with his religious conviction. He counters the pessimism with a Christian hope of putting an end to the vacuum which in turn

becomes a new beginning. He comes across as a saviour who finds salvation possible in a life of sacrifice for the common good. For example, *The Waste Land* concludes on a positive note with a hope of spiritual regeneration made possible when the wisdom of the East joins hands with that of West. The Sanskrit words, “*Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata./Shantihshantihshantih*” (Rainey 70) keep reverberating in the reader’s heart, bringing on possibilities of check and control.

Matthew Arnold, who is considered in some ways as the germ out of which Eliot developed his theory of culture, was a religious humanist and an ethical idealist. In his poetry, he always comes across as an objective spectator, carefully delineating his mental anguish- a reflection of a larger cultural crises. His prose brings forth his multidimensional genius combining in his persona the literary, the social and the religious critic, who is an active participant, simultaneously involved and affected by the circumstances of his age. Robbins notes that Arnold repeatedly appealed “enthusiasts and extremists” in his prose writings to observe

the Aristotelian golden mean, to reject obscurantism on behalf of man’s instinct for expansion and change, to rebuke innovation in the name of painfully acquired wisdom, to check fanaticism and blind materialism by reminders of the spiritual needs of man, to help us live by that happy fusion of powers he calls ‘the imaginative reason.’ (ix)

Arnold discovered the germ of the discontent prevalent in his times in the stubborn opposition that Christianity threw at the growing rational ideas and scientific spirit of the age that resulted in pushing to the backseat the Biblical criticism in England. Moreover, Arnold found an imbalance in the way different aspects of Christianity were being popularized. This attempt at popularizing Christianity erroneously emphasized more on dogma, miracle and metaphysical proof and less on the moral nature of man that shook the foundations of Christianity. Arnold observes:

To popular opinion everywhere, religion is proved by miracles.... Yet how much more safe is it, as well as more fruitful, to look for the main confirmation of a religion in its intrinsic correspondence with urgent wants of human nature, in its profound necessity. (*Essays in Criticism* 189-190)

Arnold, instead, concentrated on a balancing equation. Culture in Arnold’s schema indicates harmony, perfection and balance. Religion and culture are deeply connected in Arnold’s schema in which man’s goal consists in attaining perfection with reason and will of God by his side. Religion places ‘Kingdom of God’ within man and culture too sees human perfection as an internal condition. This is why Arnold minces no words in declaring himself as a worshipper and propagator of culture. He is clear about the position he has taken with respect to culture when he says, “...I am a liberal, yet I am a liberal tempered by experience,



reflection, and renouncement, and I am, above all, a believer in culture.” (*Culture and Anarchy* 32)

In culture, Arnold attempted to describe an objective centre of authority to counteract the tendency to anarchy. Culture assists humans to accomplish the ideal of endless self-inclusion, power build-up and growth in wisdom and beauty. Men of culture oppose the contentment begotten out of the common materialistic gains of wealth and industrialism. Culture precisely seeks freedom from the fanaticism that formalized religion generally preaches.

In the mid-twentieth century, Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* initiated the process of remoulding the meaning of terms like, canon, culture, centre and tradition. He started as Left- Levisite but the Marxist undercurrent to his thought brought an inclusive and egalitarian approach to literature and culture by creating a possibility of integrating working class into existing capitalist societies. He also extended the range of literary texts having significant cultural bearings and also posited radical ways of analysing the equation between society and its culture.

Raymond Williams’s contribution to the early development of Cultural Studies is immense. In fact, he is credited with having supplied a huge body of theory for the project. With Hoggart, he shared the immediate experience of working class sensibility and also the resulting sympathies. Therefore, both rejected elitism in culture and literature which was current then. He believed, therefore, that working-class culture too was an organic culture. In *Culture and Society*, he traces the history of the idea of culture and concludes that perception of culture is subject to changing socio-political conditions because culture is basically a way of life. He argues that the change that Industrial Revolution has brought about has correspondingly shaped the idea of culture in currency. Deliberating on the relative and dynamic status of the meaning of culture in the essay, “Culture is Ordinary” he writes:

“Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land.” (7)

In calling culture ordinary, he was voicing his opposition to the then prevailing critical notion regarding the epoch as being dominated by masses usually labelled as low in taste and habit. He doesn’t find anything elitist about the idea of culture representing some elitist attributes. *Culture and Society* is just a critique of the prevalent notion of culture and posits culture as a mirror of the prevailing social conditions.

The idea of universal values that assist humans in their progress towards perfection seems unrealistic for Williams. Values, in his view, are relative and grounded in a particular social

situation. Idealism is a pretence and therefore definition of culture when compiled under idealistic pretence is inherently flawed. Culture, then, does not lead to perfection and progress, it is simply an aspect of human history that changes with time depending upon how material conditions of a society change. Against Arnold's culture as 'the best that has been thought and known' Williams posits an inclusive definition of culture that is an index of economic and social conditions. In the later years of the development of Cultural Studies this perception of culture as a product shifted to seeing culture as a fountainhead of meanings shaping economic and social relations. In this position of "culture as the production and circulation of meaning," Judy Giles sees it as "a significant site for the formation of discourses by which one social group or community (a sex, race, nation or society) legitimates its power over another group or community." (Giles and Middleton 25) Seeing culture in this capacity facilitated in the formation of postcolonial theory whereby it was made clear who the colonized are in relation to the colonizer and vice versa.

Today cultural studies under the influence of Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers has developed into a full-fledged discipline focussing on meaning making, ideology and power relations. It seems it has fled from the clutches of the traditional proponents of the theory of culture into a discourse which quite generously attributes to culture anything having cultural bearings. This tendency has attracted takers as well as detractors who have, in their own ways, carried cultural studies and the study of culture into different domains and places.

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