

# LITERATURE AS A PART OF MODERN CULTURE

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to study impact of literature in modern society is that is undeniable and how literature acts as a form of expression for each culture. Interest in the relationship between literature and society is hardly a new phenomenon. We still read and refer to the ancient Greeks in this regard. In *The Republic*, for example, Plato presages both Mme. de Staël's treatise of 1800, which was the first to discuss cross-national differences in literature, and later notions of literary reflection with his idea of imitation. What is new, however, is the relative legitimacy of the study of literature within the discipline of sociology. This is due both to the increasing interest in culture in sociology after years of marginalization (Calhoun 1989) and to the increasing influence of cultural studies on sociology and throughout the academy.

Literature is considered to be a reflection of the culture of its times. As known, it is also said that literature mirrors society. Literature is considered to be written works that have some artistic merit in it and has lasting value. The two most important words in the term 'popular literature' are 'popular' and 'literature'. Both the terms are expansive and wide in meaning. "Popular" comes from the Greek word "Populus", which means people. So popular culture/literature is people's culture/ literature. Literature is vast, encompassing poetry, prose, and drama from across history, as well as the more modern disciplines of film and media studies. In the modern world, the idea of literature has taken on new meaning as new concepts and technologies have emerged with the changing culture. From internet memes and viral content, to eco criticism and even the occasional zombie—enjoy a wander through a five captivating and eclectic topics in the world of literature. Goldmann justified his focus on the canonical works he studied by arguing that lesser works fail to achieve the necessary clarity of structure that allows the sociologist to see the homologies present in works by, for example, Racine and Pascal (1964). In the 1960s Louis Althusser challenged the preeminence of Lukács's tradition through, in part, his emphasis on the autonomy of literature. Thus Goldmann's work, though it was influential at the time of its publication, has been eclipsed as newer theories have made more problematic the notion that literature embodies a single meaning that is reducible to an expression of class consciousness.

**Key words:** *Literary, Cultural Theory, historical approach, canonical works.*

## Introduction

Literature draws on the social world, but it does so selectively, magnifying some aspects of reality, misspecifying others, and ignoring most (Desan et al. 1989). The reflection metaphor assumes a single and stable meaning for literary texts. Anyone who has ever argued about what a book "really" meant knows what researchers have worked hard to demonstrate—textual meaning is contingent, created by active readers with their own expectations and life experiences that act in concert with inherent textual features to produce variable meanings (Jauss 1982; Radway 1984; Griswold 1987).

Peterson (1985) outlines six production factors constraining the publishing industry. Berezin (1991) demonstrates how the Italian fascist regime under Mussolini shaped the theatre through bureaucratic production. Long (1986) situates the concern with economic concentration in the publishing industry in a historical perspective, and argues that a simple relationship between concentration and "massification" is insufficient for understanding contemporary publishing. Similarly, although as part of larger projects, Radway (1984), Long (1985), and Corse (1997) analyze the publishing industry and its changes as a backdrop for an understanding of particular literary characteristics. Radway traces the rise of mass-market paperbacks and the marketing of formulaic fiction to help explain the success of the romance genre (1984; chapter 1). Long (1985; chapter 2) acknowledges the importance of post World War II changes in the publishing houses and authorial demographics in her analysis of the changing visions of success enshrined in best-selling novels, although she grants primary explanatory power to changes in the broader social context. Corse (1997, chapter 6) provides a cross-national study of Canada and the United States, arguing that the publishing industry in the latter dominates the former because of market size and population density. Canada's publishing industry has become largely a distributive arm of the American publishing industry, despite governmental subsidies and other attempts to bolster Canadian publishing. The result is that American novels dominate the Canadian market (Corse 1997, pp. 145–154).

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### **OBJECTIVE:**

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Literature** which helps in understanding human nature and conditions which affect all people with numerous human **cultures**, beliefs, and traditions.

### **TRADITIONAL APPROACHES**

As recently as 1993, Wendy Griswold maintained that the sociology of literature was a "non-field" and "like an amoeba . . . lack[ing] firm structure" (1993, p. 455). Certainly the sociology of literature has been a marginal area in the discipline of sociology. As such, it has generally failed to attract the kind of career-long commitments common to more central areas of the discipline. Many scholars writing on the sociology of literature see the area as a sideline and produce only a single book or article on the subject. This has exacerbated the lack of structure in the development of the field. Even so, it is surprising just how much sociological research has been done on literature and on literature's relationship to social patterns and processes.

**Reflection Theory.** Traditionally, the central perspective for sociologists studying literature has been the use of literature as information about society. To a much lesser degree, traditional work has focused on the effect of literature in shaping and creating social action. The former approach, the idea that literature can be "read" as information about social behavior and values, is generally referred to as reflection theory. Literary texts have been variously described as reflecting the "economics, family relationships, climate and landscapes, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars,

[and] religion" of the society that produced the texts (Albrecht 1954, p. 426). Most people are familiar with an at least implicit reflection perspective from journalistic social commentary. For instance, when Time magazine put the star of the television show Ally McBeal on its cover, asking "Is Feminism Dead?" (1998), it assumed that a television show could be read as information on Americans' values and understanding of feminism.

Unfortunately, "reflection" is a metaphor, not a theory. The basic idea behind reflection, that the social context of a cultural work affects the cultural work, is obvious and fundamental to a sociological study of literature. But the metaphor of reflection is misleading. Reflection assumes a simple mimetic theory of literature in which literary works transparently and unproblematically document the social world for the reader. In fact, however, literature is a construct of language; its experience is symbolic and mediating rather than direct. Literary realism in particular "effaces its own status as a sign" (Eagleton 1983, p. 136; see also Candido [1995, p. 149] on the "liberty" of even naturalist authors).

Despite repeated demonstrations of reflection's myriad failings (e.g., Noble 1976; Griswold 1994; Corse 1997), the idea of literature as a mirror of society still seems a fundamental way of thinking about why sociologists—and indeed many other people as well—are interested in literature. A relatively crude reflection approach remains common for teaching sociology department courses on literature, and also in certain types of journal articles whose main interest is not the sociology of literature per se, but the illumination of some sociological theory or observation through literary "evidence" (e.g., Corbett's article [1994] advocating the use of novels featuring probation officers to teach courses on the sociology of occupations, or the continuing stream of articles examining gender portrayals in children's literature [e.g., Grauerholz and Pescosolido 1989]). Convincing research arguing for literary evidence of social patterns now requires the careful specification of how and why certain social patterns are incorporated in literature while others are not (e.g., Lamont 1995), thorough attention to comparative data across either place or time (e.g., Long 1985), and a detailed consideration of the processes that transform the social into the literary (e.g., Corse 1997).

**Structural Reflection.** A more sophisticated but still problematic type of reflection argues that it is the form or structure of literary works rather than their content that incorporates the social: "successful works . . . are those in which the form exemplifies the nature of the social phenomenon that furnishes the matter of the fiction" (Candido 1995, p. xiii). The "humanist" Marxist Georg Lukács is perhaps the seminal figure in the development of a Marxist literary sociology. Marxism is the only one of the three major strands of classical theory to have generated a significant body of work on literature. Lukács (1971) argued that it is not the content of literary works but the categories of thought within them that reflect the author's social world.

Goldmann (1964, 1970), Lukács's most prominent student and the one most influential for American sociology, proposed the concept of a homologous relationship between the inherent structure of literary works and the key structures of the social context of the author.

The High Culture/Popular Culture Divide. Traditionally in the United States sociologists have left the study of high culture to specialists in literature, art, and music. This attitude was partially a product of sociologists' discomfort with aesthetic evaluation. Popular culture, on the other hand, was seen as simply unworthy of attention or study. To the extent that sociologists did consider literature, they tended to focus on high-culture literature, in part because of the largely Marxist orientation of many early sociologists of literature. Marxist thought defines literature as part of the ideological

superstructure within which the literatures of elites are the ruling ideas since culture serves to legitimate the interests of the ruling class.

The tendency to concentrate on high-culture literature was intensified by the Frankfurt School, which understood "mass" culture as a destructive force, imposed on a passive audience by the machinery of a capitalist culture "industry" (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno 1972). Lowenthal's ([1961] 1968) analysis of popular magazine biography, for example, stressed the increasing focus on leisure-time consumption over production and on personality over business and political achievement, as the private lives of movie stars and sports figures came to dominate magazine biographies. This approach highlighted the passivity and docility of audiences, tying mass culture to the increasing apathy of the public. Thus this work saw literature both as a reflection of changing social patterns and as a force shaping those patterns. Although researchers now rarely use the term "mass" culture, the Frankfurt School's critique continues to inform much of current cultural sociology, although often it does so on an implicit level as researchers react either positively or negatively to this understanding of popular culture.

One response to the critique of mass culture was articulated by the scholars of the Birmingham School. This line of research shared earlier understandings of culture as a resource for the powerful, but focused in large part on the potential for active participation on the part of cultural receivers. Work in the Birmingham School tradition drew heavily on feminist approaches and demonstrated how "mass" audiences of popular cultural forms might engage in resistance, undermining earlier arguments of cultural hegemony and of passive cultural "dopes" (e.g., Hall et al. 1980; Hebdige 1979). This interest in resistance and the meaningmaking activity of readers remains an important line of research, particularly for studies of popular culture (e.g., Radway 1984). The continued relevance of the distinction between high and popular culture, however, is now under debate, as some charge that the hierarchical dichotomy is no longer the most powerful conceptualization of cultural differences (e.g., Crane 1992; DiMaggio 1987).

**Sociology through Literature.** A final type of traditional sociological interest in literature also stems from an implicit reflectionist approach. This type of work sees literature as exemplary of sociological concepts and theories or uses literature simply as a type of data like any other. While Coser's (1972) anthology exemplifies the former tradition, the recent ASA publication *Teaching Sociology with Fiction* demonstrates the persistence of the genre. Examples of the latter are altogether too numerous, including, for example, an article testing recent Afro-centric and feminist claims of differing epistemological stances across genders and races by coding differences in the grounding of knowledge in novels for adolescent readers (Clark and Morris 1995). Such work ignores ignoring the mediated nature of literary "reality." These discussions, although common, are not properly part of the sociology of literature.

## CULTURAL ADVANCES

Wendy Griswold is the key figure in the contemporary sociological study of literature in the United States. Her early research (1981, 1983, 1987) set the stage for a new synthesis that both takes seriously the issue of literary meaning and recognizes the importance of extra-textual variables, while deploying the empirical data demanded by much of the discipline. By balancing these often-competing claims, Griswold allows for a study of literature that is sociological in the deepest sense of the word. Her concern for what she has called a "provisional, provincial positivism" (1990, p. 1580) has legitimated the sociology of literature to other sociologists and has articulated to nonsociologists the unique power of



literary sociology. By publishing repeatedly in American Journal of Sociology and in American Sociological Review, Griswold made the sociology of literature visible to an extent previously unknown.

Griswold's work (1981) began with a critique of reflection theory's exclusive focus on "deep" meaning, demonstrating the importance of production variables such as copyright legislation for explaining the diversity of books available in a market. A second project (1983, 1986) investigated the determinants of cultural revival, arguing that Elizabethan plays are revived most frequently when the social conditions of the day resonate with those the plays originally addressed. In 1987, Griswold published the results of a third project centrally located in the new reception of culture approach. This innovative work used published reviews as data on reception, thus allowing Griswold (1987) to address reception across time and across three very diverse audiences—an impossible strategy in the first instance and a prohibitively expensive strategy in the second when using interviews to gather data on audience interpretation. The 1990s saw Griswold (1992) beginning a large-scale project on the literary world of Nigeria, a project that returned Griswold to her initial interest in nationalism and literature among other concerns. Griswold's impact on the sociology of literature has been powerful because she has systematically developed a methodological approach to studying literature and other cultural products and because her substantive research integrates a concern for meaning and the unique properties inherent in literary texts with an equal interest in social context, in the actors, institutions, and social behaviors surrounding texts.

Griswold's concern for the integration of literary content with social context is shared by many. Janet Wolff, although she works primarily in visual arts rather than literature, has repeatedly challenged sociological students of culture to take content and aesthetics seriously, allying these concerns with their traditional specialty in social context and history (e.g., 1992; see also Becker in Candido 1995, p. xi). Priscilla Parkhurst Clark/Ferguson (e.g., 1987) has written extensively on the literary culture of France, combining a study of specific works and authors with detailed analyses of literary institutions and social processes, in addition to her normative writings on improving the sociology of literature (1982). Corse (1995, 1997) combines a detailed reading of three types of American and Canadian novels with a historical consideration of the two nations' canon development and a survey of the respective publishing industries to create a full picture of cross-national literary patterns and the explanation thereof. These works draw upon several important new approaches developed in the last twenty years.

**The Production of Culture.** The production of culture approach was the earliest of the new paradigms reinvigorating the study of culture in sociology. It stemmed from the growing interest of several prominent organizational sociologists in the sociology of culture (e.g., Hirsch 1972; Peterson 1976). These scholars made the now obvious insight that cultural objects are produced and distributed within a particular set of organizational and institutional arrangements, and that these arrangements mediate between author and audience and influence both the range of cultural products available and their content. Such arguments stand in stark contrast to earlier nonsociological conceptions of artistic production that featured artists as romantic loners and inspired geniuses with few ties to the social world. Art, in this view, is the product of a single artist and the content of artistic works and the range of works available are explained by individual artistic vision. Becker's influential *Art Worlds* (1982) effectively refuted such individualistic conceptions of cultural producers, at least in sociological research. Researchers in the production of culture tradition have showed conclusively that even the most antisocial artistic hermits work within an art world that provides the artistic conventions that allow readers to decode the work. Artists are free to modify or even reject these conventions, but the conventions are a crucial component of the

work's context. Art worlds also provide the materials, support personnel, and payment systems artists rely upon to create their works.

### **Social organization of the literary world**

The social organization of the literary world and the publishing industry became obvious focuses for sociological investigations, from the production-of-culture approach. Walter W. Powell initiated a major research project with his dissertation, which was followed by his work on *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* (Cosser et al. 1982) and *Getting into Print* (Powell 1985). This stream of research demonstrates how production variables, such as the degree of competition in the publishing industry, the web of social interactions underlying decisions about publication, and the fundamental embeddedness of publishing in particular historical and social circumstances, affect the diversity of books available to the public.

One important focus of production approaches is gender. Tuchman (1989) analyzes the movement of male authors into the previously female-dominated field of British novel publishing during the late 1800s as the field became increasingly remunerative. Rogers (1991), in her ambitious attempt at establishing a phenomenology of literary sociology, notes the gendered construction of both writers and readers. Rosengren's (1983) network analysis of authorial references in book reviewing demonstrates, among other suggestive findings, the persistence of the literary system's underrepresentation of female authors.

**Reception Theory and the Focus on Audience.** A second fundamental shift in the sociology of literature occurred as sociologists became familiar with the work of German reception theorists. Reception theory, and several other strains of similar work, shifted scholarly attention to the interaction of text and reader. The central figures in Germany in the late 1960s and 1970s were Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982) Jauss presents his main argument: that literature can be understood only as a dialectical process of production and reception in which equal weight is given to the text and the reader. Iser's (1978) central focus is the act of reading itself.

Janice Radway's (1984) seminal *Reading the Romance* introduced reception theory with its central interest in audience interpretation to many American sociologists, as well as to many scholars in related fields. To those already familiar with the work of reception theorists, Radway's work powerfully demonstrated the potential of reception approaches for the sociology of literature. Radway's interviews with "ordinary" readers of genre romance novels (1984) uncovered multiple interpretations, instances of resistance, and fundamental insights into literary use and gender in a genre previously scorned as unworthy of serious scholarly attention.

Reception theory has generated a fruitful line of research in the sociology of literature. Long (1987) has examined women's reading groups and their acceptance or rejection of traditional cultural authority in the selection and interpretation of book choices. Howard and Allen (1990) compare the interpretations made by male and female readers of two short stories in an attempt to understand how gender affects reception. Although they find few interpretive differences based solely on gender, they find numerous differences based on "life experience" and argue that gender affects interpretation indirectly through the "pervasive gender-markings of social context" (1990, p. 549). DeVault (1990) compares professional readings to her own reading of a Nadine Gordimer novel to demonstrate both the collective and the gendered nature of reception. Lichterman (1992) interviewed readers of self-help books to understand how such books are

used as what he describes as a "thin culture" that helps readers with their personal lives without requiring any deep personal commitment to the book's advice.

Griswold (1987) innovatively applied the reception perspective to a study of the cross-national range of published reviews of a single author, generating another fruitful line of research. Bayma and Fine (1996) analyze 1950s reviews of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* to demonstrate how cultural stereotypes of the time constructed reviewers' understandings of the novel's protagonist. Corse and Griffin (1997) analyze the history of reception of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, analyzing the different positionings of the novel over time and detailing how various "interpretive strategies" available to critics construct the novel as more or less powerful.

Stratification: One final area of growth centers on the relationship between cultural products and stratification systems. Perhaps the central figure is Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1993), whose analyses of class-based differences in taste, concepts of cultural capital and habitus, and examination of the distinction between the fields of "restricted" and "large-scale" production have profoundly affected sociological thinking. Bourdieu (1984) has demonstrated how constructed differences in capacities for aesthetic judgment help reproduce the class structure. This fundamentally affects the conditions under which types of culture are produced, interpreted, and evaluated (1993). Bourdieu's theoretical insights have inspired many researchers, although few work in literary sociology directly. For example, Corse (1997) examined the use of high-culture literature in elite programs of nation building, Halle (1992) investigated class variations in the display of artistic genres in the home, and DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) correlated cultural capital and marital selection. Cultural consumption and use are also stratified across categories other than class, for example, gender, race, and ethnicity. These categories have received even less attention than class in the sociology of literature, although some work has been done in gender (e.g., Simonds and Rothman 1992; Wolff 1990; Radway 1984).

## Conclusion

Some of the great literary works like the Bible and Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, among others, provide society with the guiding principles of life. Works by poets like Homer, Plato, Sappho, Horace and Virgil, Shakespeare's sonnets and notable poetry by W.B. Yeats, John Keats, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and William Blake, among others, are timeless. They have always amused their readers and shall continue to. The Lord of the Rings, The Godfather, A Tale of Two Cities, and James Bond Series are some of the best-selling books of all time that have entertained several generations. While some literary and poetry works carry life's lessons, many others make us think. Some works are known for the sheer entertainment they provide, while others intrigue. Many works in literature establish a strong connect with their audience through the stories they narrate or the message they carry. Readers tend to associate themselves with the emotions portrayed in these works and become emotionally involved in them. Literature thus has a deep impact on the readers' minds and in turn, their lives.

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