
Literature as a Social Document: A Study

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Abstract

This paper discusses about the literature as a social document and literature reflects the tendencies, prevailing developments and the remarkable happenings of the age in which the writers have lived. In Chaucer's time the country was reeling with social discriminations and prejudices. It found that the Shakespeare's time the people showed that they were living in a country free from any kind of turmoil or tension. In Pope's time the poetasters were brought to book by the writers of the age. In the Restoration period there prevailed a kind of loose morality coded using which the people went crazy and fashion- mongering.

Keywords

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Introduction

The social origins of a writer play only a minor part in the questions raised by his social status, allegiance, and ideology. The writers, it is clear, have often put themselves at the service of another class. Most court poetry was written by men who, though born in lower estate, adopted the ideology and taste of their patrons. The social allegiance, attitude, and ideology of a writer can be studied not only in his writings but also, frequently, in biographical extra-literary documents. The writer has been a citizen and has pronounced on questions of social and political importance. He has also taken part in the issues of his time. In this essay we shall look at the functions of literature as a social document.

Writers and Their Sociological Views

Much work has been done upon political and social views of individual writers; and in recent times more and more attention has been devoted to the economic implications of these views. Thus L.C. Knights, arguing that Ben Jonson's economic attitude was profoundly medieval, shows how, like several of his fellow-dramatists, he satirized the rising class of usurers, monopolists, speculators, and "undertakers". Many works of literature-e.g. "histories" of Shakespeare and Swift's Gulliver's Travels - have been reinterpreted in close relation to the political context of the time. Pronouncements, decisions, and activities should not be confused with the actual social implications of a writer's works. Balzac is a striking example of the possible division for, though his professed sympathies were all with the old order, the aristocracy, and the Church, his instinct and imagination were far more engaged by the acquisitive type, the speculator, the new strong man of the bourgeoisie. There may be a considerable difference between theory and practice, between profession of faith and creative ability.

Problems of Social Origins

The problems of social origins, allegiance, and ideology will lead to sociology of the writer as a type, or as a type at a particular time and place. We can distinguish between writers according to their degree of integration into the social process. It is very close in popular literature, but may reach the extremes of dissociation, of "social distance" in Bohemianism, with the free creative genius. On the whole, in modern times the literary man seems to have lessened his class ties. There has arisen an

“intelligentsia,” a comparatively independents in between class of professionals. It will be the task of literary sociology to trace its exact social status, its degree of dependence on the ruling class, the exact economic sources of its support, prestige of the writer in each society.

Development in the Middle Ages

In the Middle, there are the monks in the cell, the troubadour and other men at the Court or baron's castle, the vagrant scholars on the roads. The writer is either a clerk or scholar, or he is a singer, an entertainer, a minstrel. But even kings like Wenceslaus II of Bohemia or James I of Scotland are now poets. In the German Meistersang, artisans are organized in poetic guilds, burghers who practice poetry as a craft. With the Renaissance there arose a comparatively unattached group of writers, the Humanists, who wandered sometimes for country to country and offered their services to different patrons. Petrarch is the first modern poet laureate, possessed of a grandiose conception of his mission, while Aretino is the prototype of the literary journalist, living on blackmail, feared rather than honored and respected.

Transition Period

In the later history the transition occurred from support by noble or ignoble patrons to that afforded by publishers acting as predictive agents of the reading public. The system of aristocratic patronage was not universal. The Church and the theater supported special types of literature. In England, the patronage system apparently began to fail early in the eighteenth century. For a time, literature, deprived of its earlier benefactors and not yet fully supported by the reading public, was economically worse off. The early life of Dr Johnson in Grub Street and his defiance of Lord Chesterfield symbolize these changes. Yet a generation earlier, Pope was able to amass a fortune from his translation of Homer, lavishly subscribed by nobility and university men.

The Victorian Period

The great financial rewards, however, came only in the nineteenth century, when Scott and Byron wielded an enormous influence upon taste and public opinion. Voltaire and Goethe had vastly increased the prestige and independence of the writer on the continent. The growth of the reading public, the founding of the great reviews like the Edinburgh and

the Quarterly, made literature more and more the almost independent “Institution” which Prosper Mérimée, writing in 1822, claimed it to have been in the eighteenth century. Charles Dickens and Thackeray made contributions to the society by the publication of their novels through which they sought to condemn social evils.

American and European Social pictures

A similar series of social pictures could be assembled for American life from the novels of Mrs. Stowe and Howells to those of Farrell and Steinbeck. The life of post – Restoration Paris and France seems preserved in the hundreds of characters moving through the pages of Balzac's Human Comedy; and Proust traced in endless detail the social stratifications of the decaying French aristocracy. The Russia of the nineteenth century landowners appears in the novels of Turgenev and Tolstoy we have glimpses of the merchant and the intellectual in Chekhov's stories and plays and of collectivized farmers in Sholokhov. Examples could be multiplied indefinitely. One can assemble and exposit the “world” of each, the part each gives to love and marriage, to business, to the professions, its delineation of clergymen, whether stupid or clever, saintly or hypocritical, one can specialize upon Jane Austen's naval men, Proust's artists and Howells married women. This kind of specialization will offer us monographs on the “Relation” between Landlord and Tenant in Nineteenth – century American Fiction,” “The Sailor in English Fiction and Drama”, or “Irish” Americans in Twentieth – century Fiction.”

Relationship of the Picture to Society

But such studies seem of little value so long as they take it for granted that literature is simply a mirror of life, a reproduction, and thus a social document. Such studies make sense only if we know the artistic method of the novelist studied, can say- not merely in general terms, but concretely- in what relation the picture stands to the social reality. Is it realistic by intention? Or is it, at certain points, satire, caricature, or romantic idealization? In an admirably clearheaded study of aristocracy and the middle classes in Germany, Cohn – Bramstedt rightly cautions us : “only a person who has a knowledge of the structure of a society from other sources the purely literary ones is able to find out if, and how far certain social types and their behavior are reproduced in the novel what is pure fancy, what realistic observation, and what only an expression of the

desires of the author must be separated in each case in a subtle manner.” Using Max Weber’s conception of ideal “social types,” the same scholar studies such social phenomena as class hatred, the behavior of the parvenu, snobbery and the attitude toward the Jews. He argues that such phenomena are not so much objective facts and behavior patterns as they are complex attitudes, thus far better illustrated in fiction than elsewhere. The students of social attitudes and aspirations can use literary material, if they know how to interpret it properly. Indeed, for older periods, they will be forced to use literary or at least semiliterary material for want of evidence for the sociologists of the time: writers on politics, economics, and general public questions.

Characters in Literature

Heroes and heroines of fiction, villains and adventuresses, afford interesting indications of such social attitudes. Such studies constantly lead into the history of ethical and religious ideas. We know the medieval status of the traitor and the medieval attitude towards usury, which, lingering on into the Renaissance, gives us Shylock and, later, Moliere’s L’Avare. The classic case is that of Restoration English comedy. Was it simply a realm of cuckoldom, a fairyland of adulteries and mock marriages as Lamb Believed? Or was it, as macaulay would have us believe, a faithful picture of decadent, frivolous, and brutal aristocracy? Or should we not rather, rejecting both alternatives, see what particular social group created this art for what audience? Should we not be mindful of satire and irony, self-ridicule and fantasy? Like all literature, these plays are not simply documents; they are plays with stock figures, stock situations, with stage marriages and stage conditions of marriage settlements. E.E.Stoll concludes his many arguments on these matters: “Evidently this is not a real society,” not a faithful picture even of the ‘fashionable life’: evidently it is not England, even ‘under the Stuarts,’ whether since or before the Revolution or the Great Rebellion.” Still the salutary emphasis upon convention and tradition to be found in writing like Stoll’s cannot completely discharge the relations between literature and society. Even the most abstruse allegory, the most unreal pastoral., the most outrageous farce can, properly interrogated, tell us something of the society of a time,

Conclusion

From what has been said so far it becomes clear that literature reflects the tendencies, prevailing developments and the remarkable happenings of the age in which the writers have lived. In Chaucer’s time the country was reeling with social discriminations and prejudices. In Shakespeare’s time the people showed that they were living in a country free from any kind of turmoil or tension. In Pope’s time the poetasters were brought to book by the writers of the age. In the Restoration period there prevailed a kind of loose morality coded using which the people went crazy and fashion- mongering.

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