

Close reading: culture
is ordinary by
raymond williams



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The article by Raymond Williams is an attempt to describe and analyse the changing dynamics of culture through its constant shifts in meaning. He begins his essay with a brief account of a visit to his childhood home in Wales, in a few words describing his own personal history. From his anecdote, Williams delves into his main argument, that Culture is ordinary, breaking this idea into two parts, “ the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested” (Williams, 1958, p.). He then explores this concept further by contesting two common ideas of culture that he has encountered, firstly what Williams labels as “ Teacup culture”, where the only culture to exist is high culture such as the arts, literature etc. Secondly, he views the opposite end of the spectrum, the ‘ drinking hole’ culture, and rejects the people whom, likewise, recognise culture solely as high culture, and therefore label culture as a product of only highbrow, upper class people.

Discussion is then focused on the works of Marx and Leavis, where Williams endeavours to highlight the ways in which their ideas have shaped his own ideas. Williams finally concludes his point that ‘ ugliness’ is a price needed to pay in order to stimulate the economic power on one’s society, an economic power that is a result of industrialisation. The opening anecdote of Williams’ trip to his childhood home is used as a strategy to employ within us a notion that a society is forged through the common meanings and directions of its members, with its growth constantly changing under the pressures of experience and discovery.

This idea links to his overarching ideas of culture reiterated through this essay, as stated in my first paragraph, that there are two ways of understanding culture “ the known meaning and directions... [and] the new observations and meanings” (p. 6). To extend on the point made in his anecdote, Williams produces two conceptions of culture that he came across, both examples which he rejects. The common illusion of ‘ high culture’ present in both of these examples is seen by Williams as a way of maintaining class divisions between the ‘ highbrow’ and working class, bringing the idea of culture back to the notion of power.

The language used in this essay is very personal, and can be seen quite clearly in this argument, as you can see his deep rooted working class sensibility in his attack on these two perceptions of culture, but also from his background as an academic as well. While this is helpful in considering that he can see the situation from two polar opposites of class, that being working class and academic, occasionally Williams tends to rely on this as fact and causes his essay to lose credibility.

In aid of understanding Williams’ notion of culture, three Marxist principles are explored, only one of which is accepted. The first principle alludes that culture must be interpreted through its underlying system of production. This idea of culture, constantly changing, needs to be understood through the notion of power. Education and power is controlled by those who are in power, and therefore create new systems of production, consequently creating new culture through new thought and changing arts.

The second principle, which Williams challenges, states that it is a “ class-dominated culture”, where the common intake of ‘ culture’ is restricted to a small class and the masses of people are left ignorant (p. 8). Williams disputes this claim, enforcing how the working class are in fact not restricted, but merely discovering their own culture through means of learning. He insinuates how bougeois culture can teach working class values in future cultural developments, such as “ neighbourhood, mutual obligation, and common betterment” (p. 9).

The final principle conveys the idea that “ since culture and production are related, the advocacy of a different system of production is in some way a cultural directive” (p. 9). Williams strictly rejects this, on the premise that culture is made up of individual and collective meanings, and is therefore ever-changing and unpredictable. He suggests how, as such personal and social experiences are living, it is simply inconceivable to dictate through a change in systems of production. Williams also rejects Leavis’ idea, who believes that with the industrialisation of England, both art and thinking have suffered.

Though he struggles with the idea, he returns to his working class background to view the technological advances and easing on labour, which are in place due to industrialisation, as advantageous. He views it as a newly acquired form of power. He further queries how such power can be bad for society, questioning whom could go back to before there were such products that were brought about by industrialisation and technology, such as electricity or aspirin. Engaging in this idea, Williams wonders how we can defend the “ good” advances, and also answer the problem of the “ new

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cultural vulgarity" (p. 1)? In answering this, he puts forward falsities that have arisen from the critics of culture, namely, one false proposition, two false equations, and one false analogy. It is these that Williams aims to disprove.

The false proposition implies that from the new sources of power and production, stems an ugliness or vulgarity throughout England. Williams counters this by stating, while they may start out as ugly, soon enough they will "make England clean and pleasant again" (p. 11). The first false equation is that popular education is responsible for the new commercial culture (p. 1). Williams, however, believes "There are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses" (p. 11). He abruptly disperses the notion of popular education and commercial culture as cause and effect, arguing how the "bad new commercial culture came out of the social chaos of industrialism, and out of the success, in this chaos, of the 'masses' formula, not out of popular education" (p. 12). The second false equation was deemed that popular culture is an accurate guide to the mind, feelings and quality of living of its consumers.

Williams rejects this through cause of anecdotal evidence in regards to his own personal life, family and friends, where his observations of people who consume popular culture reveal that one doesn't reflect the other. Finally, the false analogy he finds is that "Just as bad money will drive out good, so bad culture will drive out good" (p. 13). He denounces the idea of bad culture causing good culture to decrease, but rather, informs how culture is expansive, every part of it. Williams uses the ideas of Marx and Leavis, not in

support of his ideas, but in revealing how his ideas were formed through his rejection of many of their ideas.

It is interesting to note how Williams, rather than discarding the ideas as useless or irrelevant based on his disagreement with them he makes a point of highlighting how the ideas he has no use for are indeed what shaped his thinking most evocatively. In these arguments, Williams most aptly reveals his point that Culture is Ordinary; he expresses how culture is not an elitist or classified ideal. Rather, it is an unrelenting negotiation of power through exchanges and ideas. Works Cited Williams, R. (1958). Culture is Ordinary. Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader , 5-14.