

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 07
Neoclassical Literary Theory

Hello everyone and welcome back to another lecture on Literary Theory. As you know we had ended our previous lecture on Longinus Theory of Sublime by noting how similarities may be drawn between the notion of sublime and the Romantic Movement. But before we move on to discuss the romantic movement of the late 18th and early 19th century, we will have to dwell upon the story of the preceding 100 years. This is because it was during these 100 years. So, I am talking roughly about the period from late 17th century to late 18th century. These were the years that saw the emergence of an attempt to theorize literature within the field of English literary studies.

Now, this statement might sound controversial, so let me elaborate. It was during the period between late 17th and 18th century that English literature gradually became a subject of critical interest and scholarly discussion. Now, it is important to note here that English literary studies as an Institutionalized Academic Discipline would not be established till 19th century. The late 17th and 18th century emergence of English literary studies was not connected with academic institutions, but rather with what is known as the growth of the public sphere in Britain.

So, here I am making a distinction between the emergence of English literary studies and the emergence of English literary studies as an academic discipline. As an academic discipline, it will emerge only during the 19th century, but as a field of debate and discussion, it gradually emerged during this period from late 17th to 18th century.

So, it is within this public sphere that English literature first started being discussed in a comprehensive and coherent manner. The development of literary theory viz English literary studies was at the heart of this 18th century enterprise to engage with literature in general and English literature in particular in a systematic manner.

In today's lecture, we will discuss how the emergence of a public sphere in Britain gave rise to English literary studies as a new field of discourse. We will also discuss how this

in turn was connected with the development of the first set of critical theories that was inherently connected to English literary studies, a set of theories that are today identified by the name Neoclassical Literary Theory, but I want to open this discussion by looking at the term literature itself, and here I would like to reiterate some of the things that I have already mentioned in my first lecture in this series.

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Literature (from the Latin word *littera*) simply meant literacy - the ability to read.

Literature which has its roots in the Latin word Littera was associated in English till the 16th century with the notion of literacy which is simply the ability to read.

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William Caxton
(1422 CE - 1491 CE)

He introduced the printing press into England in 1476.



Source: Wikipedia

Ever since, Caxton established the first printing press in Britain in the 15th century and printed books started becoming more and more available; the ability to read printed material became one of the prominent signs of literacy. So, the literacy that was signified by the term literature, now after the establishment of the printing press in Britain started to mean the ability to read printed material. The ability to read printed books and literature even today retains this strong link to the ability to read printed books, indeed this is precisely why oral forms of literature are regarded as a kind of special or even marginal category within the field of literature.

Furthermore, in an age where drives to achieve mass literacy was unheard of, the ability to read was a sign of accomplishment that could only be achieved by a leisured class. A leisure class would undergo a fairly prolonged training in order to achieve literacy. This kind of time was not available to everyone in the society. The ability to read which signified having literature in oneself also had a limited class basis, a limited class base because reading material including printed books was only available to a very few. They were enormously expensive compared to the prices that they have today and at that point of time, they were available only to a very few group of people within the society.

So, literature ability to read printed books was something was a practice that was fairly limited to a very small social class. Thus, by the 18th century, literature was firmly connected to the idea of social distinction to it was a mark of belonging to that small social group, a privileged social group literature at least in the sense in which it was associated with literacy and printed books was an activity that was far removed from the presence world of back breaking manual labour acquaintance with literature was.

Therefore, a sign of belonging to the upper echelon of a class bounce society, but the question is who constituted this upper echelon of society in Britain of 17th and 18th century. The answer to this question was actually fast changing because in 1640s, England had experienced a bloody civil war which had culminated in the beheading of King Charles, the first and the establishment of a Republican state. This led a severe blow to the existing power structure of the society in which the long entrenched aristocrats headed by an absolutist monarch held complete sway over the affairs of the state.

The bourgeoisie as a distinct class was making their presence felt on the political arena through trying to establish the primacy of the parliament over the arbitrary dictates of the monarchs and the establishment of a republic in 1649 significantly tilted the scales towards their favor. These gains of the civil war were retained by the bourgeois and even further enhanced through the glorious revolution in 1688. Another major event in 17th century British history and 1688, though it saw the return of the monarchical form of government, this return to monarchy was significantly different from the kind of monarchy that Britain had known till before the civil war. William Mary who had made the new monarchs of Britain following the glorious revolution were also administered a coronation oath in which they had to swear that they would govern according to the statutes and laws that have already been discussed and agreed upon in the parliament.

Therefore, the new centre of power no longer remained the court of an autocrat when a voice of one man reigned supreme over all other voices. Now, the sight of true power became the parliament whether members conversed as equals and not as subordinates. This spirit of holding a discussion amongst equals which informed and indeed still informs the idea of our parliament was replicated in the 18th century more locally by such informal gathering places like clubs, coffee houses and chocolate houses. And these were the places which formed what is known as a bourgeois public sphere in Britain and it is in this broader story of the rise of the bourgeois politics and bourgeois public sphere that we can locate the emergence of English literary studies and its quest to develop a coherent theoretical discourse about literature here.

However, I need to clarify something in British literary history. Every major socio political change has resulted in the creation or adaptation of some new kind of literature or the other. For instance, the Norman conquest of England in 1066 resulted in a great social as well as political shake up of the country and as a direct result of it. We see the emergence of the metrical romances which occupies such a crucial place in medieval literary history of Britain.

Similarly, the rise of the bourgeoisie in Britain during the 17th and 18th centuries also brought with it a new form of literature and this new form was that novel, but my focus in this lecture is not the rise of this new bourgeois form of literature, but rather the rise of a new bourgeois form of looking at literature in general of studying it, of studying literature and of talking about literature. What is unique and unprecedented here is,


therefore not the development of a new literary genre like the novel, but rather the development of a shared parameter for critically judging literature as an art form within the general field of English literary studies.

In the rest of the lecture, I will talk about two very important things. First, I am going to talk about the idea of public sphere, what it means and what was the kind of public sphere that we see developing in Britain during the 17th and 18th century and the 2nd thing that I am going to talk about is a kind of literary theory that this British public sphere give rise to and why this particular kind of literary theory is today known by the name of Neoclassical Literary Theory.

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Jürgen Habermas
(1929 -)

• *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962).

A photograph of Jürgen Habermas, an elderly man with white hair and glasses, wearing a brown suit jacket, white shirt, and dark tie. He is seated at a table with a glass of water and a nameplate that partially reads "Habermas".

Source: Wikipedia

So, to begin with the idea of the public sphere, now this is a term that is most strongly associated with the work of German intellectual Jürgen Habermas who in his book titled *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* which was originally published in 1962. The German version, the Habermas in that book describes public sphere as constituted by social institutions which provide a platform for debates and discussions through which public opinion is shaped.

So, according to urban mass public, sphere is constituted by different kinds of social institutions which provide platforms for debates and discussions through which public opinion can be formed, public opinion can be shaped and if we look around us, we can

see numerous instances of such platforms of open public debates and discussions ranging from village squares to television studios. Now, I think you will realize that these social institutions become especially relevant within a democratic political structure because it is precisely in such a political system that public opinion gets shaped through open debates and these open debates, then shape the function of the government, the shape of the government.

So, within the political system of a democratic country, these platforms of open public debate which constitute the public sphere becomes very relevant and very important and in the western world, the public sphere became more and more important as feudalism gave way to more democratic structures of governance and for Britain more specifically those social institutions constituting a public sphere of debate discussion and opinion making became significant from the late 17th century onwards following the beheading of the absolutist King Charles, The 1st and subsequently through the assertion of the parliaments supremacy.

Now, in this public sphere which in Britain came to prominence during the late 17th-18th century had two very strong influences. The first was the influence of enlightenment and the second influence was that of capitalism. Now, enlightenment which swept through Western Europe during the 17th and 18th century prioritized reason, prioritized rationality and it foregrounded the ability of human reasoning to make sense of the world around us. God or the faith in divine authority was no longer called upon to explain human existence or the universal order which framed that existence and this privilege of the rational, this privilege of reason, the faculty of reasoning formed a key aspect of the late 17th and 18th century public sphere as well.

If we consider the court of a monarch, we will see that it is the voice of one person which has absolute sway over all other voices and the reason why this single voice has an absolute sway over all other voices is because the voice of the monarch is considered to be divinely guided, and this is at the heart of feudalism. The monarch does not need to convince others through reasoning. His words are taken for granted simply because he is the monarch and is situated at the top of a hierarchical social and political pyramid, where unquestioning obedience is the norm. If you compare this to the public sphere informed by the values of enlightenment, you will see that public opinion is shaped by people who appeals to the reasoning faculty of their fellow participants.

So, unlike the court, the members of the public sphere are perceived by each other as equals and the argument or opinion of one member can only trump the argument and opinion of another member if they are perceived as more rational, if they appeal to the reasoning faculty more, this privilege of rationality like all the other forms of discourse emerging from within this public sphere also influenced the discourse of Neoclassical Literary Theory. Thus, we find John Dryden who was one of the most influential British poets and literary theorists of the 2nd half of the 17th century argue in his work titled *Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy*. That literary criticism should be and I quote founded upon good sense and sound reason rather than on authority.

Now, let us come to the influence of capitalism on the emerging public sphere of the late 17th and 18th century. As noted earlier, the institutions that made up the public sphere during this period replaced the monarchs port as a site of social, political and economic formation and whereas, the courts were the domain of the aristocrats, the institutions of the public sphere were primarily the domain of the bourgeoisie whom the growth of capitalism had pushed forward.

Thus, the public sphere that emerged in Britain during the period under discussion was essentially a bourgeois public sphere and it was informed through and through, this public sphere by the economic and political interests of the modolo class, but the discourses that took shape within this bourgeois public sphere were not merely limited to the economic and the political. Rather it also included the cultural and the public sphere was also used by the bourgeois to shape a cultural worldview which was in sync with their economic and their political views. It was as part of this broader bourgeois cultural project that we see the development in Britain of the field of English literary studies and the associated field of literary theory.

So, from this general discussion of context within which Neoclassical Literary Theory emerged, let us now move to some specific aspects of this literary theory. As I have explained while discussing the etymology and the development of the term literature within English language, engagement with literary texts was associated during the late 17th and 18th century with culture taste with cultural refinement. Possessing or reading literature signified a degree of cultural sophistication which was supposed to distinguish the new bourgeois from the peasants and industrial labourer's attempts to critically

engage with literature was indeed perceived by the bourgeoisie as a mark of an elevated social status.

That was earlier exclusively enjoyed by the aristocrats and during this period, we therefore see the emergence of a literary theory that is deeply concerned with the issue of developing cultural refinement and with the issue of developing social sophistication. A clear instance of this is to be found in the 18th century journals like *The Tattler* for instance or *The Spectator* where people like Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, but using these journals highly effectively to instruct the bourgeois readership on what literature to read in order to develop a cultural taste that would distinguish them as gentlemen.

Now, it is important to note here that in the matter of judging what is good and proper literature and developing a refined cultural taste through it. The literary theorists of the bourgeois public sphere relied heavily upon the classical literary and theoretical texts and this was primarily, because the values of the classical texts were already well established. This means that the key classical texts that we have discussed in our previous lectures like for instance Aristotle's poetics or Cicero's *Longinus on the sublime* formed a sort of template on which the new kind of English Literary Theory was scripted during the late 17th and 18th century. It is for this reason that the literature criticism that emerged during this period from the bourgeois public sphere is referred to as Neoclassical Literary Criticism because it revisited in such a significant way.

The classical Literary Canons, now one of the chief ways in which literary theories of the bourgeois public sphere were using the classical texts was by treating them as the repositories of stylistic decorum and literary rules and conventions. The works of Aristotle for instance or Longinus or Horus while being used to formulate a set of literary do's and don'ts which could then be applied either to produce new literary works which were good and proper or to judge existing literary works. And then to see how well they were fitted to develop one's cultural taste and one's social refinement you need for the 18th century British poet and theorist Alexander Pope. These rules which he could find in the classical texts went even beyond the issue of stylistic decorum because according to Pope, the literary conventions devised by the classical author were a reflection of the rules that underlined nature itself.

So, for a literary critic or an author acquaintance with these classical rules were not simply a matter of cultural taste, but also a matter of truthful reflection of nature and of mans place within nature.

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“Those Rules of old *discover'd*, not *devis'd*,
Are *Nature* still, but *Nature Methodiz'd*”.

(“Essay on Man”, Alexander Pope)

So, as Pope writes in his famous Essay on Man and a quote "Those rules of old discovered, not devised and nature still, but nature methodized" and then, a few lines later we find Pope advising both the author and the critic and I quote again.

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“Learn hence for Ancient *Rules* a just
Esteem;
To copy *Nature* is to copy *Them*”.

(“Essay on Man”, Alexander Pope)

"Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem; to copy nature is to copy them". It is how important to note that these rules and conventions which are the new classical theorists culled from the texts of the classical predecessors did not evoke an unquestioning admiration.

Take for instance, The Rule of the Three Dramatic Unities. Now, this is a particular rule which enjoyed a great degree of popularity among the 17th and 18th century theorists which stated that any play in order to attain the elevated status of a Classical Greek drama needs to abide by three important things, three unities. The first is that it needs to have unity of place which means that it needs to confine its actions to a single location. Second is it needs to have unity of time and resist any attempt to randomly jump forward or backward in time and thirdly and perhaps most importantly, it needs to have unity of action where the plot remains uncontaminated by any subplot that might divert the audience from the main story, main focus.

Now, though many new classical theorists believed in the sanctity of these rules which they could see being abided by sort of Classical Greek tragedians, there are also others who questioned these rules by pitching the pleas of against these rules because if you read Shakespeare's tragedies, you will see that almost all of them regularly violate each of these three unities. Thus, though on the one hand we have someone like Pope who insists that we learn just esteem for the ancient rules and on the other hand, we have texts like Dryden's essay on criticism for instance, where the matter of following rules and conventions of the classical authors is pleased within the structure of a rational debate. So, it is not something that is presented as you know a set of rules that is written in stone, it becomes a matter of debate and discussion at least in Dryden.

In many ways, Dryden's text is perhaps more representative of the spirit of open debate that informed the bourgeois public sphere than Pope's admonitions to follow the rules laid down by the ancient, but in spite of acknowledging this diversity, there is no denying the fact that an excessive concern with rules, with conventions and with stylistic decorum occupied Neoclassical Literary Theory of the late 17th and 18th century and this concern would remain strong, till it will be displaced by the emergence of a radically new conceptualization of literature within the field of English literary studies during the late 18th and early 19th century.

It is to this new conceptualization of literature that we will turn in our next lecture, where we will start with our discussion of Romanticism.

Thank you.