

SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LITERATURE

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Статья посвящена проблеме интерпретации литературного произведения. Социологический подход (также, марксистский подход) – один из существующих способов анализа литературных произведений.

Ключевые слова: социологический подход, литературная критика, общественные структуры, общественное сознание, литературная интерпретация.

The article deals with the problem of literary interpretation of a work of art. The sociological approach (or the Marxist approach) is one of the existing modes of analyzing a literary work.

Keywords: sociological approach, literary criticism, social structure, social consciousness, literary interpretation.

The sociological approach to literature means locating an author and his works in a wide social context. So, a work of literature can only be properly understood by examining the society in which it was written. “A sociological approach to literature entails analyzing how a work of literature reveals structural inequalities that are still relevant today” [3]. This direction of critical studies got its notable place in literary criticism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “With the spread of the ideas of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, the sociological approach became a scientific method of literary interpretation” [4]. Taine considered literature to be the expression of “race, milieu and moment”, but Marx and Engels regarded it as a phenomenon of the social structure. They were more concerned with purely economic factors and the role of the social classes in the society. In their opinion, the essence, nature and function of art and literature could be fully understood only by relating it to the existing social conditions and by analyzing the social system as the whole. “Literature and art, as considered by them, are forms of social consciousness and social change is bound to create changes in literature and art” [4]. According to James Barnett, Marx thought that the system of production determined the content and styles of arts of the society. He argued that every art preferences differ according to class position and outlook [4].

Marx and Engels demonstrated the relation between the material and aesthetic modes of production. Their ideas in “The German Ideology” demonstrate that

productive relations and productive methods determine the character of culture. The role of literature is to stabilize the ideology of the society [4].

In his article “George Bernard Shaw: A Study of the Bourgeois Superman” Christopher Caudwell gives an overview of G.B. Shaw’s literary and political activities. The writer was one of the early members of the Fabian Society and got the reputation of a bourgeois socialist. In the author’s opinion, Shaw exposed the weakness and the essence of the bourgeois brand of socialism. It represents the primacy of pure contemplation. In pure contemplation man is alone, exempt from cooperation and wrapped in a private world. He is then believed, by bourgeois thought, to be wholly free. The author calls it the bourgeois illusion. The knowledge of Marx enabled Shaw to attack destructively all bourgeois institutions. But he wasn’t able to give the answer to the question, What should be done besides talking? This problem, in the veiled form of “tainted money” emerges in Shaw’s work repeatedly – in “*Widower’s Houses*”, “*Major Barbara*”, “*Mrs. Warren’s Profession*”. Shaw suggests no active steps. But because he has read Marx, he understands all the contradictions of this solution. Therefore his plays are full of deliberately forced conversions, unconvincing denouements, an escape from reality through the medium of fantasy and humour, Christopher Caudwell states. Shaw never believed in a bourgeois class regenerated by Fabianism. Hence, more and more his plays became futile and unresolved. Civilization is driven “*On the Rocks*” or is in the “*Apple Cart*”. Or the dramatist tries to comfort himself by turning to a period when a bourgeois class played an active creative part (“*St. Joan*”). He draws St. Joan as the heroine and the prophet of bourgeois individuality amid a dying medievalism.

In conclusion the critic argues that G.B. Shaw performed a useful function in exposing the weakness of the bourgeois class. He stood by the side of Wells, Lawrence, Proust, Huxley, Hemingway and Galsworthy as typical of their age. They were the men who proclaimed the disillusionment of bourgeois culture with itself, the men who were disillusioned themselves and yet not able to wish for anything better. As Christopher Caudwell concludes, that made them pathetic, rather than tragic figures, for they were helpless, not because of overwhelming circumstances, but because of their own illusion [2].

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