

## SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LITERARY STUDIES

**Пинчукова Татьяна Петровна**

Могилевский государственный университет имени А.А. Кулешова  
(г. Могилев, Беларусь)

*The article provides an overview of sociological approach, and, one of its variations, Marxist criticism, to analyzing a literary work. The validity of that approach, as well as some of its limitations are under analysis.*

Sociological criticism starts with a conviction that art's relations to society are vitally important, and that the investigation of these relationships may organize and deepen one's aesthetic response to a work of art. Art is not created in a vacuum; it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important part. The sociological critic is interested in understanding the social milieu and the extent to which and manner in which the artist responds to it.

Edmund Wilson traces sociological criticism to Vico's eighteenth century study of Homer's epics, which revealed the social conditions in which the Greek poet lived. Herder in the nineteenth century continued with the approach, but it was the Frenchman Taine who brought it to fullest statement with his famous pronouncement that literature is the consequence of the moment, the race, and the milieu. Before that century ended, Marx and Engels had introduced a fourth factor, the methods of production, and thus made possible the development, in the thirties, of that special branch of the sociological approach – Marxist criticism.

The tendency to associate art and social values is intrinsic to the realistic movement in literature. In America, Howells, Jack London, Hamlin Garland, and Frank Norris have all been concerned with the relation between literature and society.

Thus John Macy composed *The Spirit of American Literature* in 1908 from the viewpoint of socialism, and the strength as well as the weakness of Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought, 1927-1930*, came from his personal commitment to Jeffersonian liberalism.

But with the economic depression writers began to add a powerful tool of judgment to their examination of literature as a mirror of society. Both in England and America authors moved politically to the left. Witness the poetry of Auden, C. Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Archibald MacLeish. Journals were formed – for example, the *New Masses*, under Michael Gold's editorship, and the *Left Review*, under Edgell Rickword – which served as organs for Marxist criticism. Symposia were edited: Hicks' *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, 1935, C. Day Lewis' *The Mind in Chains*, 1937, Bernard Smith's *Forces in American Criticism*, 1939. And books by single authors argued the cause: V. F. Calverton's *The Liberation of American Literature*, 1931, John Strachey's *The Coming Struggle for Power*, 1933, and Ralph Fox's *The Novel and the People*, 1937.

The result was, first of all, an extraordinarily vigorous critical approach. The touchstone seemed clearly defined: dialectic materialism; the method of application showed how the work contributed to the cause of this social truth. Consequently, the judgments could be made with an Old Testament force of conviction. So literature and its creators were sorted as being with or against the Truth; the single-minded critic, frequently unfazed by the complexities of art's relations to society, and strengthened by the mood of faith and the sense of revelation, demanded that writers share his creed, and that literature show its validity. There were exceptions: the vision was too narrow for some, notably Christopher Caudwell, whose profound knowledge of Marxism and mature taste for literature enabled him to resist the gravitational pull toward the crude absolutism that characterized the approach of many lesser Marxists of the time.

But there was madness in the method. As the yardstick became shorter and the applications more naïve, it became uncomfortably apparent that the intensity of the vision was achieved at the price of its breadth. James Farrel, in *A Note on Literary Criticism*, 1936, took his fellow Marxists to task for their benighted dilutions of the problem. Edmund Wilson too, once he had abandoned the group (though Taine as much as Marx had been his mentor) joined the attack with his essay, "Marxism and Literature" in *The Triple Thinkers*, 1938. Finally, with the Russo-German pact and the outbreak of World War II in 1939, and the consequent confusion and defection of many votaries, the movement lost its central strength and ceased to be a major force in literary criticism.

But the excesses of this critical aberration did not destroy the validity of the sociological study of literature. The Achilles' heel of sociological criticism, as of the moral in general, lies in the area of judgment – the narrowing temptation to praise or condemn a piece according to the extent to which its social or moral implications

are congruent with the convictions of the critic. We need not condemn Restoration comedy for instance, as does L. C. Knights, for being so unrelated to the most important thought of the period; but to view that body of writing with the reminder that Isaac Newton, Sir Thomas Browne, and John Bunyan also were forming, in their own ways, the cultural atmosphere, is to see the comic drama in a new light. This is, in fact, what the best sociological critics do: place the work of art in the social atmosphere, and define that relationship. If too narrow an evaluation follows, this is likely to reveal the moral position of the critic, as much as the intrinsic merit of the work.

Scholars, of course, have long been interested in the ties between the art, the writer, and the social milieu, and very often their studies contain implicit judgments based on those associations. But the associations are not simple. Harry Levin stated that the relation between literature and society were reciprocal. Literature is not only the effect of social causes; it is also the cause of social effects. So critics continue to draw to this complex association. Van Wyck Brooks has for a long time been writing a series of books devoted to the social atmosphere in which American writers worked; F.O. Matthiessen is the author of one of the most thoughtful of such studies, *American Renaissance*, 1941; L.C. Knights has pursued the same goal in *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, 1937. It is clear that as long as literature maintains its bonds with society – and that cannot help but be forever – the sociological approach, with or without the persuasion of a particular theory, will continue to be a vigorous force in criticism.

The sociological, or historical point of view opens the possibility of seeing a work in its social and economic context.

One of the sociological approaches, the Marxist approach, provides an opportunity to note that some emphases in literary criticism flow and evolve with the times. Various authors and critics throughout the twentieth century showed interest in class conflict, the problems of the poor, the effects of a capitalist system. But literary concerns keep developing, and what had been popular during the Spanish Civil War or the Cold War, was less popular in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After the breakup of the Soviet Empire, additional views have been advanced.

Fredric Jameson stresses, that “In recent years... a different kind of Marxist criticism has begun to make its presence felt upon the English-language horizon. This is what may be called – as opposed to the Soviet tradition – a relatively Hegelian kind of Marxism ...” [2, IX].

This renewed interest in Marxist criticism is the result of the opinion of many that the formalistic approach has been inadequate. The formalistic approach, Marxists say, is elitist and deals too restrictively with the work of art.

The new Marxist criticism challenges the formalistic approach in the words of Richard Wasson, “to explain how their own methodologies can come to grips with class, race, sex, with oppressions and liberation” [3, p. 177].

The Marxist critic deals with content, and in the content literature's importance in the movement of history is to be found.

### **Literature**

1. Frow, J. *Marxism and Literary History* / J. Frow. – Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1986. – 289 p.
2. Jameson, F. *Marxism and form : Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* / F. Jameson. – Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 1971. – 381 p.
3. Wasson, R. *New Marxist Criticism : Introduction* / R. Wasson. – College English, 1972, № 34. – 203 p.