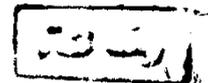


**The Concept of Culture
in the Writings of T.S.Eliot
and Raymond Williams:
A Comparative Study**

**A Thesis
Submitted in Fulfilment of the
Requirements of the Degree of
M. A. in Literature**

**By
Mohsen Kamal Abbass Hassanein**



under the supervision of

**Professor
Radwa Ashour
Department of English
Faculty of Arts
Ain Shams University**

16497

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Dedication

To my parents, brothers and sisters and to my wonderful
extended family of friends>



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Preface

Though the study of culture is organically related to the study of literature, research in culture has often been neglected by departments of English in Egyptian universities. This thesis is a modest attempt to rectify such neglect. It is a comparative analysis of the concept of culture in the writings of T. S. Eliot and R. Williams. Though both writers achieved distinction as literary intellectuals - Eliot as poet, playwright, journalist and critic and Williams as critic, novelist, and journalist - this thesis undertakes to explore their respective concepts of culture, an exploration which makes it necessary to discuss political and social issues.

In a general sense, the study indicates how the efforts of both Eliot and Williams are part of a tradition of English writings about culture and the role of the intellectual in society. While Eliot's writings and ideas tend to be conservative and at times reactionary, Williams' are home-made; Marxist ingredients are often mixed with nineteenth and twentieth centuries English ingredients which he believed were still relevant and useful. Although, the ideology behind both T. S. Eliot's and R. Williams' views on culture were different, society as each sees it played a major role in influencing their way of viewing culture as a whole. While Eliot insists that the culture of a given people requires a certain level of consciousness, R. Williams maintains the view that consciousness is not

a prerequisite of culture in that the continuing participation of the society in areas of common views and values, shapes the culture of that society in an unfinalized, never ending sense.

The study is divided into an introduction and five chapters. Chapter one casts light on Eliot's definition of culture; a definition that states that culture is the product of a variety of harmonious activities, each pursued for its own sake. As he believes that no one can control culture, he suggests that we should concern ourselves with the conditions that contribute to its growth. Unlike Arnold who limits perfection to manners, philosophy and art, Eliot takes the three senses of culture - the culture of the individual, the culture of the group and that of society - into account at the same time. His view of culture is organic and he himself fights against any fragmentalization of culture pursuits.

Chapter two depicts Eliot's plea for a future society that he believes would provide a very reliable basis for the highest attainable culture; namely the Christian culture. His presentation of the issue of class in this society is theological rather than sociological. His discussion of other political ideologies is to prove that his envisaged christian society is the only possible alternative left to the westerners. Chapter three compares the structural idea of the class system as it involves the elite versus the structure of society in general,

explaining the expectations placed on the elite within the society as well as its limitations.

Chapter four demonstrates Williams' view of the development of the word "culture". He sees that the word may be seen as a record of a group of important and continuing reactions to the changes in English social, economic and political life. He also suggests a new term to describe the actual experience through which the character of a society and its pattern of culture were lived; namely the structure of feeling. He also refers to three levels of culture; the lived culture, the recorded culture, and the culture of the selective tradition. The chapter also discusses Williams' change of attention to issues such as those concerned with base and superstructure. The point that Williams raises is that Marxism has etherealized the activities of the superstructure by its emphasis on the presence of a distinction of some kind between base and superstructure. His main argument is that a definition of culture that separates between culture and man's production of his material needs is a big failure.

Chapter five presents R. Williams' view that the whole making of culture is a democratic operation and that it depends on the participation of the whole people. This common making of culture will not be possible to take place -says Williams- until it is completely recognized that communication is an offering and that it is an attempt to achieve active response and

reception. Though Williams' common culture is not always equal yet equality of being is always essential to it and is still prior, in importance, to common culture. Williams is against conceding a priority of any kind to only one activity in society because the social activities are simultaneous in our experience and consequently equivalent in significance. The conclusion sums up the main points in the thesis and draws some comparisons between both writers.

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Introduction

Introduction

The concept of culture in the mid-nineteenth century formed the central motif in discussions about the nature of art and its relationship to society. Its roots lay in the romantic notions of art and the artist's role in society which had dominated literary circles in the first half of that century. Assertions of the superior reality of art and special function of artists in society implied by the concept of culture were given their most forceful expression in England by the romantic poets. R. Williams argues that the notion of culture employed by literary intellectuals in the nineteenth century has its roots in the 18th century. The most forceful expression was crystallized by M. Arnold in the mid-victorian period in England. One is inclined to believe that in turning to such a concept, writers like Arnold rejected the temptation implicit in romanticism for the artist to withdraw and to isolate himself from society.

R. Williams argues that M. Arnold deliberately uses the term "culture" as central to his ideas about society whereas his predecessors such as Coleridge did not place it in such a dominant position. Those writers usually used other terms such as "cultivation". In his Culture and Anarchy, 1869, Arnold defines culture as:

a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.¹

Though the commitment to a set of values in such a definition is explicit, the definition provides the central distinction between this concept of culture and the concept employed by anthropologists and sociologists in the 20th century. The latter concept stresses a relativistic value neutrality and assumes the form of discussions about "cultures" rather than "the culture".

Bauman draws attention to this distinguishing feature of what he calls the "hierarchical concept of culture":

The term 'culture' if understood hierarchically, can hardly be used in the plural. The concept makes sense only if denoted straight wordly as the culture; there is an ideal nature of the human being, and the culture

1. M. Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, ed. J. Dover Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 1963, p. 6.

means the conscious, strenuous and prolonged effort to attain this ideal, to bring the actual life process into line with the highest potential of the human vocation.²

In this sense culture, as it is described by literary intellectuals in England, invokes the classical ideal of Renaissance humanism as Williams has once noted in Culture and Society. It substitutes the claim by romantic primitivism that man should return to a 'natural' state with the humanistic contention that it is man's distinctive privilege to conceive of an ideal end for himself. Bates states that humanism from Plato through to the Renaissance believed that to know "the good is to do it", such a belief is implicit in Arnold's statement that perfection is to be sought "by means of getting to know ... the best which has been thought and said ...". Arnold's reference to the best which "has been thought and said" illustrates a further instance of the classical humanist influence in this concept of culture. The English literary intellectuals return constantly to this notion, which, according to Bates gained prominence some centuries earlier with the Renaissance humanist.

2. Zygmunt Bauman, Culture as Praxis, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1973, p. 9.

However those classical influences do not preclude romantic tendencies in the concept of culture. Romantic notions of genius and creativity that depict the artist or intellectual as having a superior vision of the world from an essential feature of this concept. R. Williams emphasizes the romantic tradition of the English poets of the 18th and early 19th century as the intellectual heritage of the concept. But Williams also recognizes that the idea of culture rests on some classicist claims about art. He suggests that romanticism and classicism should be understood in this context as "two sides of the same claim."³ they represent two aspects of "idealist theories of art."⁴.

The vision of society that informed the critique operated by Arnold and his contemporaries was clearly hierarchical. They did not seek structural changes in society but wished to effect reforms through a kind of cultural regeneration. Society was attacked because it was not upholding the moral principles which it claimed for its existence. In turning to the concept

3. R. Williams, Culture and Society, Middlesex, Penguin (first published by Chatto and Windus in 1958) 1985, p. 56.

4. Ibid.

of culture. as has been previously noted, writers such as M. Arnold rejected the romantic temptation for the artist to isolate himself from society. In fact Arnold believed that the special powers of the artistic imagination should judge the quality of life in modern industrial society which he attacked and criticized for its lack of due regard for human values, those values that look beyond individualistic satisfaction. Individualism and materialism prevailed according to Arnold, crushing the most valuable qualities of the human spirit.

William Morris was equally concerned with people's way of life, but he was not restricted by this concern to a cultural critique. He rejected the assumption of a hierarchically structured society associated with the literary tradition, and as a socialist, worked to promote its radical transformation.⁵ Significantly the concept of culture played no role in Morris's ideas. Unlike other intellectuals of this period, Morris displayed no particular interest in elaborating notions of the specialness of the intellectual's or artist's role in society. He was distressed by the preoccupation with materialism and individualism which he believed had a deleterious effect on art. Morris's critique of society and his analysis of the threat to

5. Culture and Society, ed. cit., pp. 159-160.