



## Marxism and Literature

*Raymond Williams*

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## Marxism and Literature Raymond Williams

This book extends the theme of Raymond Williams's earlier work in literary and cultural analysis. He analyzes previous contributions to a Marxist theory of literature from Marx himself to Lukacs, Althusser, and Goldmann, and develops his own approach by outlining a theory of cultural materialism' which integrates Marxist theories of language with Marxist theories of literature.

Williams moves from a review of the growth of the concepts of literature and ideology to a redefinition of determinism' and hegemony'. His incisive discussion of the 'social material process' of cultural activity culminates in a re-examination of the problems of alignment and commitment and of the creative practice in individual authors and wider social groups.

## Marxism and Literature Details

Date : Published February 16th 1978 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published 1977)

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Author : Raymond Williams

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# From Reader Review Marxism and Literature for online ebook

## **Ben says**

Interesting concepts, but Williams' writing is so dry at times. I read this just after finishing Eagleton's "Introduction to Literary Theory," which could not be more different in terms of style.

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## **Sally says**

Here's what I've learned so far:

Ideology is tricky to define.

Sensuous Human Activity = culture, kind of. More like material culture.

From his picture on the cover Marx must have had great bed head in the mornings. I wish I could touch it.

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## **corky says**

Dominant, residual and emerging. Williams give one of the top three explanations for how cultures are formed.

I dare you to explain his "structure of feeling."

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## **James says**

This was written about 20 years after Culture and Society and Williams, along with the rest of the New Left, had turned into something of a theory-head, but he still keeps his feet on the ground.

My hypothesis why nobody reads this and everybody reads Frankfurt School and Foucault: this, and other works in the tradition (Thompson, Eagleton), at least makes you feel bad for doing nothing, while the latter allow you to sip lattes and bask in the fact that while you certainly can't do anything about it and have no interest in changing your lifestyle you sure are a lot smarter than everyone else.

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## **Andrew says**

Despite the sludgy writing style, there is a lot of valuable stuff in here. You'll have to forgive the author for living in his time period to a certain degree (the dubious specters of Althusser and Lukacs are found throughout), and you'll have to forgive the fact that "literature," despite being present in the title, only really shows up in the last 30 pages or so, but as an analysis of how hegemony filters into our daily life, it's a

decent argument.

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### **Michael Mena says**

Genius. Will take a couple read-throughs to get everything out of this...

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### **sologdin says**

part of an introductory series of "Marxism & [stuff]," nevertheless offers author's own original contribution to doctrine, such as the residual/emergent distinction, "structures of feeling" as a development of ideology theory, and so on.

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### **Nathaniel says**

apparently everyone else found this writing really dry but idk I thought it was really engaging? like, it's academic, for sure, but it's *conversational* academic.

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### **M. says**

I AM SO SICK OF MARXISM

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### **Alex says**

Good ol' Ray-jay Billiams breaks down old concepts. He does that Rayjay thing he likes to do, by which I mean, he looks at the historically evolving meanings of words accumulated over many English centuries, inside and outside of that Marxist tradition.

Takes 'sensuous activity' from Theses on Feuerbach and embroiders it on a banner. Waves said banner vigorously. "Let's not divide 'thought' from 'material'; let's banish vulgar economism alongside bourgeois idealism." In other words, 'praxis makes perfect.'

My favorite essays are in the first two sections.

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### **meeners says**

brilliantly illuminating - would recommend to anyone. at the heart of williams' argument is a stress on language as *activity* (active practice rather than static, separated fact). this may seem self-evident but williams shows how muddled it can all get once you move out into the territory of "literature" and a certain

tendency to separate the forms from the social process. the real contribution of a marxist theory of literature would be to prove that they can *never* be separated from each other: form is "inevitably a relationship," embedded in and constitutive of processes that are at once social, historical, and material.

*It is the special function of theory, in exploring and defining the nature and the variation of practice, to develop a general consciousness within what is repeatedly experienced as a special and often relatively isolated consciousness. For creativity and social self-creation are both known and unknown events, and it is still from grasping the known that the unknown – the next step, the next work – is conceived.*

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### **Lobo says**

Doktorat in progress.

To genialna odtrutka na Matthew Arnolda. "Literatura bur?uazyjna b?dzie tylko literatur? bur?uazyjn?". Love it <3

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### **Kyle says**

Didn't read the Literary Theory section but the rest was solid. The introduction to certain concepts and themes is really just Williams breaking down the use of language to show the historical progression of the concepts, followed by his take on the concept which usually challenges a standard reading so that was mildly interesting.

The book really becomes valuable/awesome around page 100 where he begins to address hegemony. His take isn't radically different than Gramsci's yet it in many ways succeeds because it is an emphasis of Gramsci's original take. The way hegemony is taught in university courses is basically what Williams is challenging in these sections. Rather than hegemony being an Illuminati-esque structure reigning over society, it is the everyday practices which we assimilate through culture which work to benefit the dominant power structure. It isn't an Orwellian TV screen in everyone's bedrooms spouting off orders as I've often seen it compared to. To some this might seem like common sense but Williams delves deeper into the subject and really clarifies just what should be meant by hegemony when discussed.

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### **Ayeshah says**

First of all, I HATE Marxism! :)

That being said, this book is an excellent intro to Marxist theory in literary and cultural studies. A lot of the concepts discussed by Williams are extremely helpful to any student attempting a study of literature or culture under hegemony. Although I have to say, he's very focused on cultural hegemony based on social class, if you want a discussion of foreign hegemony, you'll have to look elsewhere.

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## **Adrienne Foreman says**

I didn't put a rating up. Because... well this really has some important ideas for Marxist Literary theory. Some of its very inspiring and thought-provoking. Thinking about this in relationship to Althusser or Foucault is good. Also, he suggests things that really alter the ideas of Marxist construction (breaking down the rigidity of base and superstructure).

But, the writing style is so dry, full of tangents, and stiff. I picked it up and put it right back down four times even though I had a short deadline within which I needed to read it. Good luck if you're brave enough (or have to) read this.

I definitely recommend it, but be forewarned.

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## **Meiver says**

book includes a very interesting discussion on the politics of language.

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## **Perdana says**

One of my most favorite Marxists. Marxism & Literature challenges the vulgar interpretation of Marxism, particularly in the case of culture, language, or anythings that are supposed to be on the “superstructure.” Beautifully and concisely written, Williams emphasizes the art of criticizing culture and literature in Marxism doesn't just judge whether it's revolutionary or not; but to understand writing as a social work, language as labor (vice versa), and to be aware that each literary form is emanating out of societal change. So save your hatred against Jane Austen or absurdist/bourgeois works, people :))) they might tell you something that you don't notice but important to your so-called struggle.

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## **Elizabeth says**

Raymond Williams is one of those brilliant writers and thinkers who often makes you believe that there's nothing left to say, despite the fact that he wrote all of his stuff decades ago. This book is no exception. Though it provides less empirical evidence for his arguments than many of his earlier works, it does nicely bring many of his previous theories and ideas into dialog with each other and presents a coherent trajectory for understanding the development of Williams' own work and the work of Marxist theory more generally. I found the ways he developed concepts I was familiar with -- particularly his work on literature/literacy and the dominant/residual/emergent distinctions -- particularly useful. Likewise, the chapter on "structures of feeling" neatly links up his work on the emergent/residual with larger societal structures. I wouldn't recommend this to someone who hadn't already read some of Williams' earlier work, but it is a fantastic review and provides a lovely summation for anyone who is already familiar with his broader cannon. Williams was one of the first theorists (as far as I know) to provide almost airtight arguments for the necessity of studying the social practices of individuals as a means of understanding the abstract concepts that define their lives. His desire to marry cultural criticism with actual lived experience might be difficult (if not impossible) to do, but he does a great job of convincing anyone that it is a worthwhile attempt to make.

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### **Malcolm says**

This is simply outstanding and over three decades after being written remains one of the clearest, sharpest most insightful forays into a materialist theory and practice of culture and cultural analysis. For my work in History I find the first section dealing with basic issues and concepts in Marxist analysis (there is a superb essay on ideology that cuts through all the Althusserian obscuratism that was popular at the time) helpful. More so the second section which contains essential essays on base-superstructure relations, cultural determination, structures of feeling and most especially the idea of residual, dominant and emergent cultural forms. These are classic essays in cultural analysis and essential reading for anyone working in cultural history. Without a doubt, one of the most important books in my library.

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### **Jane says**

Williams' densest. Be aware of the overall structure before you start so you can choose what's most relevant (if you really want to just look at his sociological account of literary concepts, turn to the last third - the first section is more about positioning relative to Marxist tradition in this historical moment - i.e. the 70s).

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