

Literature and Society Summary

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Summary

We can easily understand the essay Literature and Society through four simple questions:

1. Why and how was this essay written?
2. How is literature connected with society, or how is society connected with literature?
3. What is the concept of Popular and Sophisticated Culture?
4. While showing the relationship between literature and society, which writers does Leavis quote, criticize, or praise?
5. **Why and how was this essay written?** Literature and Society is an essay by F. R. Leavis (1895–1978). Leavis was once invited by the Union of the London School of Economics and Politics, where he delivered a lecture to students on the relationship between literature and society. In that lecture, he expressed his views on how literature and society are deeply interdependent. In this essay, Leavis placed special emphasis on five key elements:

- Literature
- Tradition
- Culture – (Popular & Sophisticated)
- Society
- Individual Talent

2. **How is Literature Connected with Society? Or How is Society Connected with Literature?** Before looking into Leavis's essay Literature and Society, we should remember two of his significant quotations about literature:

- "Literature is the supreme means by which you renew your sensuous and emotional life and learn a new awareness."
- "Literature is the storehouse of the recorded values."

These quotations clearly show the importance and necessity of literature in our lives. Leavis always believed that literature should be closely related to the criticism and understanding of life. Through literature, one can truly understand a society. At the same time, everything within

society is reflected in literature. This connection becomes possible through the individual talent of the writer. According to Leavis, individual talent is itself a part of society.

Thus, Leavis shows that through individual talent, literature is created, and through literature, the entire life of society is represented, its people, professions, economy, politics, history, and traditions. Similarly, society cannot exist without literature. In short, literature and society are complementary to each other, each giving life and meaning to the other.

3. The Concept of Popular and Sophisticated Culture

Popular Culture:

According to F. R. Leavis, Popular Culture is a type of culture that has emerged as a result of the modern Industrial Revolution, mechanical civilization, and commercial influence. It reflects the daily entertainment, simple tastes, and mechanical habits of ordinary people. This culture spreads mainly through mass media, advertisements, popular songs, movies, and widely read books. Leavis explains that although popular culture may seem attractive at first, it gradually weakens people's power of thought, taste, and moral sensitivity. It does not encourage people to think; rather, it dulls their intellectual and emotional faculties.

He warns that when people in a society move away from serious literature and fine art, turning only to popular culture, the moral and psychological balance of society begins to decay. In contrast, true literature, he says, renews human sensitivity and intellectual awareness, while popular culture destroys them. Leavis writes, "Mass culture is a product of mechanical civilization; it destroys discrimination and genuine feeling." That is, popular culture is the product of a mechanical society that destroys the real sense of emotion and aesthetic judgment in people.

Sophisticated Culture: According to F. R. Leavis, Sophisticated Culture is the culture of intellectually and morally refined individuals. It is based on deep thought, moral values, artistic taste, and literary seriousness. This culture is not meant merely for entertainment; it exists for the intellectual and spiritual development of human beings. Leavis describes sophisticated culture as a living tradition that elevates society through education, literature, music, art, and moral awareness. It teaches people to think deeply, to engage in self-criticism, and to understand the deeper meaning of life. It keeps society humane, moral, and emotionally sensitive.

However, Leavis warns that due to the industrial revolution and the mechanical way of modern life, this higher culture is gradually disappearing, being replaced by mass or popular culture. Therefore, literature must act as the guardian of this refined culture. According to Leavis, the

greatest literature is that in which both Sophisticated Culture and Popular Culture exist in harmony. From this perspective, he calls John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* a masterpiece because it beautifully combines the life and spirit of common people (Popular Culture) with moral and religious depth (Sophisticated Culture).

4. While showing the relationship between Literature and Society, whom did Leavis quote, criticize, and praise? Leavis was inspired by many great writers and poets such as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, William Blake, William Wordsworth, John Bunyan, and several others. As a result, he produced a number of influential critical works, including *The Great Tradition*, *The Common Pursuit*, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, *Dickens the Novelist*, and *Education and the University*.

Criticism of D. H. Lawrence:

In his essay "Literature and Society," F. R. Leavis partially criticizes the literary outlook of D. H. Lawrence. Although Leavis acknowledges Lawrence as a "serious moral novelist," he believes that Lawrence failed to represent the true social reality and moral depth of his time.

Leavis, while analyzing the social foundation of literature through the life of the working class, uses Lawrence as an example. According to him, Lawrence's portrayal of characters and environment does not fully express the genuine consciousness of the middle and working classes. Instead, Lawrence often misrepresents the true purpose and moral conflict of their lives.

Leavis observes that although Lawrence gives importance to personal relationships, sexuality, and emotions, he could not successfully connect those experiences with the broader moral and cultural consciousness of society. As a result, his works lack a balance between popular culture and sophisticated culture.

However, Leavis does not entirely reject Lawrence. He admits that Lawrence possessed a strong "spiritual awareness" but failed to relate it effectively to the real moral structure of society. In short, Leavis criticizes D. H. Lawrence because he could not harmonize personal emotion with social consciousness. According to Leavis, a true writer must present not only personal experiences but also the moral and cultural realities of society.

Criticism of Marxist Theory: The Marxist approach to literature, according to F. R. Leavis, appears to be inadequate and incomplete. Karl Marx regarded literature as a form of artistic activity created by individuals possessing certain creative abilities. In his view, literature is written when a person feels alienated or isolated. In his essay "Literature and Society," F. R. Leavis clearly criticizes the Marxist Theory of Literature. He argues that Marxists

misunderstand the true purpose of literature because they subordinate it entirely to economics, politics, and materialist thought.

Karl Marx viewed literature as an activity determined by people's social and economic conditions; that is, literature reflects the system of social production. But Leavis considers this view incomplete. He says that such a theory confines literature within the boundaries of external reality and ignores its moral, spiritual, and emotional dimensions. According to Leavis, literature is not merely the product of economic reality; it is the moral and cultural expression of the human soul. He believes that literature represents the wholeness of life, containing not only economics and politics but also morality, culture, and individual creativity.

Leavis also criticizes the Marxists for undervaluing the role of "individual talent." In his view, literature achieves greatness only when a writer combines personal creativity with social experience. Through this fusion, true literature maintains the moral and cultural balance of society. In short, Leavis criticizes the Marxist theory because it treats literature as merely the outcome of economic and political forces. To him, literature is a synthesis of individual talent and social reality, where economics, history, culture, and morality coexist in a living unity.

1. **S. Eliot's Theory of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" - Partial Agreement and Criticism by F. R. Leavis:** In his essay "Literature and Society," F. R. Leavis expresses both agreement and disagreement with T. S. Eliot's famous theory "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

- **Agreement:** Leavis and Eliot both agree that there is a close relationship between literature and society. They believe that literature can never exist apart from society; rather, it is deeply connected with its traditions, history, and moral consciousness. In his concept of Tradition, Eliot says that a poet must be deeply aware of the literary and historical heritage of the past. Leavis fully accepts this idea. He believes that to understand literature truly, one must recognize its relation to the cultural and historical continuum in which it exists.
- **Criticism:** However, Leavis disagrees with Eliot in his explanation of Individual Talent. Eliot argues that a poet should be "depersonalized"; that is, the poet must separate personal feelings and emotions from the poem so that poetry becomes an expression of the "mind" or "impersonal emotion." Leavis rejects this view. He insists that "Individual Talent" can never be depersonalized. A writer is an inseparable part of his society, culture, and human experience; therefore, both personal sensibility and social consciousness must coexist in his creation. According to Leavis, the writer and society are complementary to each other. True literature is achieved only when the writer's personal creative talent merges with the moral and cultural consciousness of society.

Like Eliot, Leavis recognizes the importance of Tradition, but he believes that literature can never be “impersonal.” Where Eliot considers literature as a reflection of the “mind,” Leavis views it as a reflection of the “living society.” Thus, Leavis agrees with Eliot’s concept of Tradition but disagrees with his theory of depersonalization in Individual Talent. For Leavis, true literature is born from the union of the writer’s individuality and the cultural life of society.

Criticism of William Blake and William Wordsworth:

William Blake - Criticism: F. R. Leavis criticizes William Blake for giving more importance to individual talent than to society. Although Leavis acknowledges Blake’s extraordinary imagination, he believes that Blake failed to maintain a living connection with society, morality, and culture. Blake’s poetry, according to Leavis, is largely “visionary”—meaning it is confined to the poet’s personal and spiritual world. As a result, Blake loses touch with the living experience of society and with popular culture.

William Wordsworth - Criticism: Leavis also criticizes William Wordsworth for focusing mainly on rustic life in his poetry. By choosing themes based on individual emotion and rural simplicity, Wordsworth fails, in Leavis’s view, to create perfect literature. Leavis argues that Wordsworth’s poems are limited to personal experience and natural beauty, and they lack the moral and cultural depth of sophisticated culture. According to Leavis, perfect literature should reflect a harmonious blend of popular culture, sophisticated culture, and individual talent.

Praise for the Augustan Age - F. R. Leavis’s View: F. R. Leavis regards the Augustan Age as one of the richest and most socially conscious periods in English literature. In his opinion, literature during this age was closely related to society, morality, and culture. Writers of the Augustan period did not merely express personal emotions; they depicted the moral standards, social values, and realistic aspects of human life. Leavis observes that Augustan literature was marked by balance, order, and rationality. It mirrored society, emphasizing human behavior, moral discipline, and social relationships.

He particularly highlights John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as a work influenced by the Augustan spirit, representing a perfect fusion of popular and sophisticated culture. The writers of this era successfully combined social experience, religion, morality, and culture; qualities that, according to Leavis, define “perfect literature.” Leavis further comments that later periods, especially after the Industrial Revolution, lost this Augustan balance. People became materialistic, mechanical, and self-centered, and as a result, literature too lost its moral depth and cultural harmony.

John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress - High Praise by F. R. Leavis: In his essay "Literature and Society," F. R. Leavis describes John Bunyan's famous work *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a unique masterpiece of literature. According to Leavis, this work achieves a rare balance in which popular culture and sophisticated culture are beautifully united. It stands as a living reflection of ordinary people's religious life, moral values, and social experience. Leavis evaluates *The Pilgrim's Progress* as great literature for three main reasons:

- **Depth of Social Context and the Augustan Tradition:** Leavis notes that during the Augustan Age, literature began for the first time to deeply reflect real social life and human behavior. Bunyan, influenced by this tradition, portrays the moral struggles and spiritual journey of humankind in both a religious and symbolic form. Under Bunyan's influence, literature moved beyond personal emotion and became a reflection of society's moral and cultural life.
- **Example of Sophisticated Culture - Refinement through Living Art:** Leavis refers to Cecil Sharp's *Introduction to English Folk-Songs from the Southern Appalachians* as an example of how folk culture can also embody refinement and moral depth. Cecil Sharp discovered that the songs and stories of the Appalachian mountain people in America represent a "living art of literature." Leavis observes that this same spirit of living art is present in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which has the unique ability to transform the experiences of common people into high culture.
- **Rich Cultural Background:** According to Leavis, Bunyan's time was marked by a culture rich in religious faith, moral awareness, and social unity. It was from this cultural background that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was born. Bunyan successfully combined the moral values, religious consciousness, and desire for personal salvation of his society into one powerful literary expression. This makes the work timeless and universal.

Leavis praises *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a perfect synthesis of popular life, spiritual insight, and refined culture; a masterpiece that unites the moral spirit of society with the artistic imagination of literature.

Criticism of Modern Literature: F. R. Leavis holds a critical view of Modern Literature. According to him, after the death of William Wordsworth, English literature gradually drifted away from the world of nature, morality, and human emotion, entering a mechanical, materialistic, and economically driven phase.

Leavis observes that modern literature has shifted from rustic life (rural simplicity) to mechanical life. Under the influence of the Industrial Revolution and materialist thought, literature has become more realistic, yet it has lost its moral and traditional depth. Writers of

this age have given more importance to economics, politics, and class struggle, while neglecting the spiritual, traditional, and moral aspects of human life.

He believes that due to the growing Marxist influence, modern literature has leaned too heavily toward economic reality. As a result, although the quality of sophisticated culture is somewhat preserved, the living human essence of popular culture has disappeared. According to Leavis, true literature attains perfection only when it reflects moral consciousness, tradition, culture, and humanity together. In modern literature, this balance has been destroyed; hence, it has failed to awaken the moral spirit of society.

Leavis criticizes modern literature for becoming mechanical, materialistic, and morally weak. In his view, modern literature has lost its sense of tradition and human values, turning into a kind of soulless art.

Concluding Part: Leavis advised students of sociology and political science to study literature as well, because literature reflects the social, political, and economic realities of earlier times. Through literature, students can compare the conditions of the past with those of the present. In this way, Leavis attempts to demonstrate the different literary tendencies across various ages, helping readers identify the major traditions in literature. Ultimately, his essay makes readers realize the vital importance of literature in life and its profound influence on society.