

# Raymond Williams' "Culture Is Ordinary"

## Critical Essay

In his 1958 essay, Williams expounds on culture in a more descriptive way. His story kicks off with a thorough description of a trip by bus that begins from Hereford and ends in the South of Wales. The description depicts the voyage as among the interesting ones through the varieties that Williams encounters on the way. These varieties as the description unveil range from valleys through factories to mountains. All these observations lead to his reflection that 'culture is ordinary'. In the essay, Williams takes the reader to his roots in his rural home in Welsh, to give an explanation about culture. As the essay points out, Williams dislikes the 195 perceptions and the interpretation of the word culture. According to him, one should interpret culture as both "...a complete way of social life with its general meanings and as the procedure of creativity and the discovery in learning and in arts" (Williams, 1983, pp.23). Williams also laments about the two prevailing cultural senses that he dislikes. For instance, the teashop culture focuses on a special class of people or the cultivated people and the drinking-hole type of culture for people who exclude all ethical culture contents and put emphasis on technical standards using scarps of psychology, linguistics, and sociology to influence what they all think. Williams (1983, pp.27) says that "...although I respect Marxists and Leavis' views about culture...I have to disagree with them..." Williams discusses the Marxist's ideas on the interpretation and discussion of the culture and disagrees with some of the raised views. He too does not agree with Leavis duality of cultures depicted before and after the industrial revolution. However, inasmuch as people continue to associate culture destruction with technology, Williams sets out to disagree with the claim declaring technology as culture friendly. Williams says that he cannot imagine a member of the society living without having these things and prefer the old and primitive ways. In his account, several languages stand out ranging from descriptive to intellectual. However, the reader can ask, 'What does Williams mean by 'Culture is ordinary?'

### **Williams' Implication in the Essay**

It is of paramount importance for the reader to unravel the implication of 'Culture is ordinary' as put forth by Williams. Different people define culture differently, with the definition varying from place to place as well as with time. It is from these differences that Williams sets forth to declare culture as ordinary meaning that it is "...not only is considered as a high or low level but also is normal things around us" (Williams, 1983, pp.7). According to him, culture forms the basis of people's lives because it occupies the front line in everything they do. In addition, he associates the very normal, or rather the ordinary things that people engage in, as the best way of depicting the culture and hence passing it for ordinary and not something exceptional.

### **Critical Analysis**

Williams succeeds in presenting his arguments through the way he strategically employs a variety of languages in his essay. For instance, in his representation of place, he employs descriptive language evident when he uses his journey by bus to explain the diverse views and changes of the culture. In addition, expressive language is used where he uses his own roots and family

background to express some points in the essay. Intellectual language too appears where he uses academic terms and language to expound on the main ideas of the culture. This text is sentimental because Williams uses a lot of personal views and experiences in describing and expounding on many issues concerning culture. Williams constantly emphasizes his roots in a working-class family. In his essay, Williams disapproves of most of the deleterious effects of the famous culture by communicating with his family members. In this essay, Williams includes different versions of the culture to show how culture varies with people. In one version, culture stands out as a whole or complete way of life that include the most familiar and common meanings of the culture as the way people live their life. The second version of culture is arts-oriented where learning and the arts refer to the special procedures and processes of creating effort and of discovery in the culture. The identification of culture involves both the fine and best individual meanings and the original usual meanings. However, inasmuch as Williams concurs with some Marx' and Leavis' opinions, he too refutes others.

Form the views by Marxists, William Cleary extracts three main principles but only concurs with the first principle, which declares obligatory to assume culture through its common underlying systems of learning and fabrication. According to the principle, power is restricted to the individuals in authority; new production systems result in new cultures, art and thoughts. However, he refutes the second idea. In fact, Williams (1983, pp. 12) argues that "...the bourgeois culture in English has no monopoly on the culture but instead future development in culture could only do better by putting more emphasis on the values of the society working classes, their neighborhood, their mutual obligation and focus on the common betterment." He further rejects the third Marxist idea on the ground that the culture consist of tapestry of collective and individual meanings, of social and personal experiences which are living and constantly changing and thus it is impossible to dictate this via a change in production systems.

then moves to the Leavis' ideas and rejects his idea though with some difficulties. Williams idea views England as distorted and industrialized and one whose thinking and art have suffered significantly. However, Williams' bus journey is no more than a metaphor.

### **Metaphor of the Williams' Bus Journey**

The essay begins with a detailed description of the Williams' bus journey, which started from Hereford to the further borders in the South Wales is a metaphor. The bus as a means of taking people to various places denotes the potentiality of the world to transform from one culture to another. During the journey, Williams takes many observations of various premises on the way such as pitheads, farming valleys, black mountains, to quote a few. The journey and the observations refer to the process of change, seen on cultures, as one moves from one place to another. The observations on the other hand refer to the varieties of cultural practices that are in existence. Therefore, the metaphor generally describes the way culture is very large and complex and the way it has changed and continues to change. It is through this metaphor that Williams comes up with the reflection that the culture is ordinary. However, William depicts mixed feelings about culture.

### **Williams' Ambivalence**

Williams depicts ambivalence about mass culture. Mass culture generally refers to culture production, distribution, as well as culture marketing. It is a set of many and distinct cultural

values and even ideas that are produced through common exposure of many people to common cultural activities, same communication media, art, and music, among others. It is only possible with aid of the modern electronic media and communication means. Williams has many emotions and thoughts about mass culture, which are positive, and sometimes negative. In one hand, Williams seems to like mass culture. He claims that it instills a sense of belonging and moral values to its members. However, on the other hand, Williams seems to lament that mass culture has resulted into many problems and calamities to the society members as some are unable to cope with many changes that are occurring in this culture.

### **Reference**

Williams, R., 1983. *Culture and Society*. New York: Columbia University Press.