

## The Relationship between Literature and Society

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### Abstract

That literature is a reflection of the society is a fact that has been widely acknowledged. Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate. Literature, as an imitation of human action, often presents a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. In literature, we find stories designed to portray human life and action through some characters who, by their words, action and reaction, convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment. It is impossible to find a work of literature that excludes the attitudes, morale and values of the society, since no writer has been brought up completely unexposed to the world around him. What writers of literature do is to transport the real-life events in their society into fiction and present it to the society as a mirror with which people can look at themselves and make amends where necessary. Thus, literature is not only a reflection of the society but also serves as a corrective mirror in which members of the society can look at themselves and find the need for positive change. It is necessary to take a close look at some works of literature, in order to understand how literature actually reflects the society.

**Keywords:** Literature, Democratic Principle French Revolution, Reflection, Metaphor

### Introduction

A literary man is as much a product of his society as his art is product of his own reaction to life. Even the greatest of artists is sometimes a conscious, sometimes an unconscious exponent of his time-spirit. The time-spirit is the total outcome, the quintessential accretion of all the political, social, religious and scientific changes of a particular age. The historical aspect of literature therefore, minor or unimportant though it

may be for aesthetic purpose, cannot be totally ignored. Thus literature reflects his zeitgeist or the Time-Spirit.

No writer can escape influence of his age. Every man, according to Goethe's statement, is the citizen of his age as well as of his country. Renan remarked: —One belongs to one's century and race, even when one reacts against one's century and race.¶ Thus literature always expresses the thoughts and sentiments of human mind which are closely connected with and conditioned by the age. The influence of the age on the human mind is due to the fact that the latter is constantly influenced by the spirit of the age and reacts to it vividly and vigorously.

The reflection of the age depends on the quality of the mind in which it is reflected. If a work of literature is to be judged by the quality of this reflection, it is apparent that it depends on the quality and nature of the reflecting mind. Literature means something that is written for refreshing and inspiring the mind. It records the thoughts and feelings of great minds. It attracts in two ways—through its matter and through its manner. The matter must be such that those who read it are interested in some way. The manner must be such as will be pleasing to the reader and adds to his fund of knowledge.

We live in a society. There are relations and interrelation between men who live in the society. We like to hear about our fellow men who live in society, their thoughts and feelings, their likes and dislikes. Naturally, if we have the power of language to express the feelings, we are well on the way to creating literature. In other words, the subject matter of literature is society in some form or the other.

The poet expresses his feeling and we who read his poetry are interested and feel at one with him and ourselves. After all, society is this bond of fellowship between man and man through communication that the poet or writer seeks. If literature expresses social sympathies, naturally it is bound to exercise some positive influence on our mind and attitude. Society reacts to literature in a living way. An inspiring poem creates general influence on society. It rouses our feelings and enthusiasm for welfare.

Shelley has called poets the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. The function of a legislator is to lay down the law, a settled course of action that men may follow. Poetry and

literature generally do this in a quiet and unobtrusive way. Novels are known to have changed the direction of the human mind and set in motion movements that have altered our ways of life. The influence of literature on society is felt directly or indirectly.

Thus Miss Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' was directly responsible for a movement against slavery in literature and life in USA of those days. The novels of Dickens had an indirect influence in creating in society a feeling for regulating and removing social wrongs, calling for necessary reforms. Sarat Chandra's novels have gone a long way in breaking conservatism as regards women in our society. It is, thus, clear that if we are interested in literature, and its influence is bound to move us amply.

Literature is made out of the lore of life. No doubt, the realistic artist brings to a focus the oddities and cruder aspects of life overmuch. But to know life fully, not only the bright side but also the seamy and dark side of life is to be known. Thus, society creates literature. It may be described as the mirror of the society. But the quality and nature of the reflection depends upon the writer's attitude of mind, whether he is progressive in his outlook or reactionary

### **Influence of the Writer**

It is an admitted fact that if the work of a writer merely reflects the spirit of his times, it cannot be great literature. It is a very useful piece of valuable material for the sociologist and the historian. It is entirely devoid of the virtue of permanence and universality. The literature of the Greeks may not appeal to an Indian or a German mind if its historical factor is taken into consideration. Similarly, Shakespeare may not be regarded a great dramatist, if he simply and purely reflects the Elizabethan period.

The essence of literature lies in the individual approach of the author, his personality which will dominate over other influences. Undoubtedly, the author is shaped by the spirit of his age, but he has also got the capabilities to mould his period. A great man of letters is the creature as well as creator of the age in which he exists. Thus we talk of the age of Shakespeare, the age of Dryden, the age of Pope, the age of Wordsworth, the age of Bernard Shaw and so on. For example, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, was a great challenge to the age of cynicism, low morals and satirical literature. This mighty book does not reveal the time-spirit of his age. Milton revolted rather than expressed the spirit of his times. Similarly, in spite of

all the atmosphere of heroism, noble ideals, and love of song and drama, the Elizabethan age could not produce another Shakespeare.

The function of literature is different from that of history. Literature is the revelation of beauty. Beauty is the expression of emotion and all such expression without any exception is beautiful. Santayana defines beauty as ‘value, positive, intrinsic and objectified’. We may explain this in less technical language as pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing. Aesthetic pleasure or beauty differs from pleasure in general on account of its objectification. There are various persons who belongs to the same school of thought. H.R. Marshall speaks of the ‘stable pleasure’ which is especially provided by art and is known to us by the name of beauty. Another psychological aesthetician M. Porena defines the beautiful as that which pleases the mind as an objective value, i.e. without any apparent reference to ourselves as the source of feeling<sup>[1]</sup>.

There is this element of objectivity in our appreciation of the beautiful. Tolstoy, in his famous book *What is Art*, defines art and literature as the communication of emotion. When we tell a story, compose a song or paint a picture with the object of communicating to others an emotion, we have ourselves felt, that is Art, Art leaps to the Olympian height of great art when the emotion is fresh and springs from a fresh and vivid attitude to the world. The beauty of a work of art, according to Tolstoy, should be assessed entirely by reference to the verdict of the greatest number of men. Thus a democratic principle was applied to the field of art criticism because Tolstoy took beauty not be objective and inherent in works of art. Beauty is a quality of the effect produced by works of art on those who are brought into contact with them. It is a mere subjective experience; works of art and literature simply produce a sense of the beautiful in the people who view it. And as Muller pointed out fifteen years ago<sup>[2]</sup>, Sociologists in the United States have paid little attention to literature and Art. They have focused on the instrumental aspects of social life primarily<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **French Revolution and the Romantic Poets**

The French Revolution brought to Europe the hope of political freedom and social reconstruction. Though the hope was dashed to the ground with the accession to power of Napoleon, its place was taken by the enthusiasm of the struggle of the nations against old regimes. Wordsworth was deeply saturated with the dogmas of the French Revolution. The *Prelude* analyses as well as communicates the progress of Wordsworth’s political sympathies.

The French Revolution stirred in him republican sympathies, which were strengthened by his visits to France. Wordsworth records the feelings of those days:

Bliss was it in those days to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven.

Wordsworth and Coleridge were intimate friends. Coleridge like Wordsworth went through a phase of revolutionary ardour. All his poetical characteristics were deeply affected by his age. The French Revolution disillusioned him and he diverted his attention to spiritual idealism which provided him mental satisfaction. The daring of a personal inspiration, and that of a fresh-created language, came to him at the same time and this is the hour when his social zeal, his hopes for mankind, freed from the hope of any immediate realization, are transformed into a spiritual idealism. Although Byron did not express the French Revolution in his works, yet he imbibed the revolutionary spirit in its action against old social conventions. He simply inherited the revolutionary aspirations which were cherished by Wordsworth and Coleridge and then later on rejected by them because of the violence of the Reign of Terror. Byron excelled most other poets of England in his being one of the supreme poets of the revolution and liberty. Shelley also became the most melodious singer of the Revolution and the poet of revolutionary idealism. He probed into the springs of Godwinian philosophy. He was essentially the poet of the Future. —His passionate love of liberty, his loathing for intolerance, his impatience of control for self and others, his vivid logical sincerity, combined to make him the Quixotic champion of extreme opinions.

### **Growth and Progress in Literature**

Literature as a whole grows and changes from generation to generation. It is not static but dynamic. It means that each age has its own particular point of interest and its own particular way of thinking and feeling about things. So the literature which it produces is governed by certain prevailing tastes. These tastes last for a time only. The tastes of one age are sure to differ and often is found to differ enormously from those of another [4]. We all know that there was no public to enjoy the same kind of poetry in Pope's day as in Spenser's, or in Scott's day as in Pope's. In Spenser's day, there was boundless enthusiasm for *The Faerie Queene*; in Pope's for the *Essays of Man*; in Scott's for the *Lady of the Lake*.

Thus, for example, one of the principal forces behind the English literature of the Elizabethan era was the immense enthusiasm for the Greek and Latin classics which had

come with what we call the Renaissance. Our writers and readers alike were under the powerful spell of Italian literature during the same period, under that of French literature at the end of seventeenth century, under that of German Literature a hundred years later. The Reformation, Puritanism, the French Revolution, the enormous progress of science during the nineteenth century: it is enough to mention these to show the intimate connection between the story of literature and general history.

### **Relationship between Literature and Society**

We all know that literature mirrors society. What happens in a society is reflected in literary works in one form or another. The literal meaning of literature is the art of written work in different forms, such as, poetry, plays, stories, prose, fiction, etc. It may also consist of texts based on information as well as imagination.

A society is a group of people related to each other through their continuous and uninterrupted relations. It is also a group of likeminded people largely governed by their own norms and values. Human society, it is observed, is characterized by the patterns of relationship between individuals who share cultures, traditions, beliefs and values, etc.

If one looks at the history of society, one will find that the nature of different societies has gone through changes from the Palaeolithic period to the present age of Information Technology. The people's living style, faiths, beliefs, cultures, etc., have never remained uniformly consistent. With the passage of time, owing to changes taking place in environment and with emergence of new technologies, we observe that the societies have not remained stubborn with regards to their norms and values, the reflections of which can be found in different forms of literature<sup>[5][6]</sup>.

Kalidas, a great poet ever born in Indian history, is first afraid of the uncertain attitude of the people, but then pleads his own points of views that provide us union of the old and the new. In *Malavikamitam*, his first play, the poet shows his humility and becomes uncertain whether people would accept his play. Therefore, in the beginning of the play, he pleads, —Every old poem is not good because it is old; nor is every new poem to be blamed because it is new; sound critics, after critical examination, choose one or the other, the blockade must have his judgment, guided by the knowledge of his neighbours.

Different societies have used and are still using different languages for the fulfillment of individuals and societies' aspirations. Sometime it is noticed that many charges are labelled against literature as well as society. A literary writing is banned because an opposite section of society finds it mirroring beliefs and norms against that society. The examples of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Taslima Nasrin's *Lazza* provide testimony to such charges.

The influence of literature on society is felt directly or indirectly. Thus Miss Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was directly responsible for a movement against slavery in literature and life in USA of those days. The novels of Dickens had an indirect influence in creating in society a feeling for regulating and removing social wrongs, calling for necessary reforms. Sarat Chandra's novels have gone a long way in breaking conservatism as regards women in our society. It is, however, clear that if we are interested in literature, and its influence is bound to move us amply. Literature is made out of the lore of life. No doubt, the realistic artist brings to a focus the oddities and cruder aspects of life overmuch. But to know life fully, not only the bright side but also the seamy and dark side of life is to be known. Thus, society creates literature. It may be described as the mirror of the society. But the quality and nature of the reflection depends upon the writer's attitude of mind, whether he is progressive in his outlook or reactionary<sup>[7]</sup>.

### ***The Rape of the Lock* is an Example of Relationship between the Two**

*The Rape of the Lock* is a poem which shows the greater bonding between the Literature and society. In this poem Alexander Pope shows himself emphatically as the spokesman of his age. This poem pictures the artificial tone of the age and the frivolous aspect of femininity<sup>[8]</sup>. We see in this poem the elegance and the emptiness, the meanness and the vanity, the jealousies, treacheries and intrigues of the social life of the aristocracy of the eighteenth century in its real form.

The poem shows that how we become acquainted with the idleness, late-rising, and fondness for domestic pets of the aristocratic ladies of the time. Belinda wakes up at the hour of twelve and then falls asleep again. We also become acquainted in the very beginning of the poem with the superficiality of the ladies who loved gilded chariots, and affected a love of the game of ombre. Their ambition to marry peers and dukes, or men holding other high titles, is indicated, too, in the opening Canto:

Then gay ideas crowd the vacant brain,  
While peers and dukes, and all their sweeping train....



An Image of Alexander Pope

The poem brings out the coquetry, the art, the artifice, and the “varying vanities” of the ladies of the time. These ladies learnt early in their life how to roll their eyes and to blush in an intriguing manner. Their hearts were like toy-shops which moved from one gallant to another.

### **Inter-Relation of Individual Personality and National Interests**

Literature has a national as well as a personal character and interest. Literature can be observed from age to age and its various transformations. It is not only as account of work done by a number of separate writers, but it is also an account of great body of literature which in its totality is to be regarded as the production of the genius of the people. Everything that for good or evil has entered into the making of our nation’s life has also entered into the texture of its literature. Ordinary English history is English nation’s biography and its literature is its autobiography. As we survey the history of English literature through all its transformations, we are brought into direct and living contact with the motive forces of the inner life of each successive generation and learn at first-hand how it looks at life and what it thought about it, what were the things in which it was most interested and by which it was most willing to be amused, by what passions it was most deeply stirred, by what standards of conduct and of taste it was governed, and what types of character it deemed most worthy of its admiration. Thus, literature is the revelation of the progressive mind as well as the spirit of the people.

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## Reflection Theory

Traditionally, the central perspective for sociologists studying literature has been the use of literature as information about society. To a much lesser degree, traditional work has focused on the effect of literature in shaping and creating social action. The former approach, the idea that literature can be "read" as information about social behavior and values, is generally referred to as reflection theory. Literary texts have been variously described as reflecting the "economics, family relationships, climate and landscapes, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars, and religion" of the society that produced the texts<sup>[9]</sup>.

Most people are familiar with an at least implicit reflection perspective from journalistic social commentary. Unfortunately, "reflection" is a metaphor, not a theory. The basic idea behind reflection, that the social context of a cultural work affects the cultural work, is obvious and fundamental to a sociological study of literature. But the metaphor of reflection is misleading. Reflection assumes a simple mimetic theory of literature in which literary works transparently and unproblematically document the social world for the reader. In fact, however, literature is a construct of language; its experience is symbolic and mediating rather than direct. Convincing research arguing for literary evidence of social patterns now requires the careful specification of how and why certain social patterns are incorporated in literature while others are not.

## Conclusion

Literature is only one of the many channels in which the energy of an age discharges itself; in its political movements, religious thought, philosophical speculation, art, we have the same energy overflowing into other forms of expression.

The study of English literature, for example, will thus take us out into the wide field of English history, by which we mean the history of English politics and society, manners and customs, culture and learning, and philosophy and religion. However diverse the characteristics which make up the sum-total of the life of an epoch, these, like the qualities which combine in an individual, are not, as Taine puts it merely juxtaposed|| they are interrelated and interdependent.

Our aim must therefore be to correlate the literature of any age to all the other important aspects of the national activity of the: time. Thus it is very essential to know the characteristics of the age in which the writer lives. A writer is not an isolated fact but the product of the age in which he lives and works. His picture of life is pervaded with the influence of his age. Thus literature is simply a mirror of life, a reproduction and obviously a social document. Literature.

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