



COMPILED AND DESIGNED BY MILAN MONDAL, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN ENGLISH, NARAJOLE RAJ COLLEGE

BACKGROUND READING

COUNTRY AND THE CITY

*ENGLISH(CC); SEM-II; PAPER-
C3T; COUNTRY AND THE CITY
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Introduction

THE IDEA OF COUNTRY AND THE CITY IS A MUCH DISCUSSED ISSUE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE. FROM THE VERY BEGINNING TILL HITHERTO A CONFLICT IS GOING ON IN BETWEEN THESE TWO PIVOTAL THINGS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE. HERE WE WILL DISCUSS ABOUT THESE TWO IN THE LIGHT OF RAYMOND WILLIAMS'S SEMINAL BOOK *COUNTRY AND THE CITY* (1973)

WILLIAMS TAKES US ON A LITERARY AND HISTORICAL GENEALOGY OF THIS CONTRAST BETWEEN THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY. THE CONTRAST IS NOT ONLY A PERSISTENT LITERARY MOTIF DURING THE EARLY EVOLUTION OF INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM, BUT ALSO MUCH MORE THAN THAT: WILLIAMS SHOWS HOW THE COUNTRY/CITY CONTRAST IS A CONCEPTUAL AND EMOTIVE DEVICE THROUGH WHICH “WE BECOME CONSCIOUS OF A CENTRAL PART OF OUR EXPERIENCE AND OF THE CRISES OF OUR SOCIETY” (289). WILLIAMS PAINSTAKINGLY TRACES THE SUBTLE AND NOT SO SUBTLE SHIFTS IN IDEAS ABOUT THE COUNTRY AND CITY AND SITUATES THEM WITHIN THE CHANGING HISTORICAL REALITIES AND DISRUPTIONS OF THEIR TIME IN CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT.



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Country

- ◆ Derived from *contra* (*against, opposite*)
- ◆ *The ideas of country are congenitally related in contrasting relation ship to the city*
- ◆ *As reference this contrast grew more frequent in 16th century England ,the polarization of the ideas behind them became further entrenched .*
- ◆ *Like any dichotomy, it is misleading but nonetheless powerful.*



Discussions

- ◆ Williams explicitly notes that the country/city divide is one of gradation, and his analysis constantly retraces the reciprocal evolution of the two. This concept comes through forcefully in his discussion of Thomas Hardy: “The pressures to which Hardy’s characters are subjected are then pressures from within a system of living, itself now thoroughly part of a wider system. There is no simple case of internal ruralism and an external urbanism” (209). Williams illustrates the point with Hardy’s image of the threshing-machine in the countryside. The machine itself is described as a hulking “tyrant.” According to Williams, the thresher is not a stand-in for the alienation of urban industrialization against the “humanity” of rural life, as many have suggested. The symbolic contradiction of a machine in the country is powerful because Hardy (and Williams) is telling us that capitalist reorganization means that there is no neat separation between the rural and the urban.



Discussions

- ◆ In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams analyzes images of the country and the city in English literature since the 16th century, and how these images become central symbols for conceptualizing the social and economic changes associated with capitalist development in England. Williams debunks the notion of rural life as simple, natural, and unadulterated, leaving an image of the country as a Golden age. This is, according to Williams, “a myth functioning as a memory” that dissimulates class conflict, enmity, and animosity present in the country since the 16th century. Williams shows how this imagery is embedded in the writings of English poets, novelists and essayists. These writers have not just reproduced the rural-urban divide, but their works have also served to justify the existing social order. The city, on the other hand, is depicted in English novels as a symbol of capitalist production, labour, domicile, and exploitation, where it is seen as the “dark mirror” of the country. The country represented Eden while the city became the hub of modernity, a quintessential place of loneliness and loss of romanticism. In the novels of Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, there seems to be a feeling of loss, and at the same time a sense of harmony among the lonely and isolated souls.





Discussions

- ◆ For Williams, “the contrast of the country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society” (p. 289). What kinds of experience do the ideas appear to interpret, and why do certain forms occur or recur at this period or at that? To answer these questions, Williams argues that “we need to trace, historically and critically, the various forms of the ideas” (p. 290). It is this historical perspective that makes Williams's work essentially important for it rejects a simple, dualistic explanation of the city as evil in search of peace and harmony in the countryside. Instead, Williams sees the country as inextricably related to the city. In search of the historical, lived form, Williams distinguishes two of his best-known categories: “knowable communities” and the “structure of feeling.” Over the centuries, Williams describes the prevailing structure of feeling—traces of the lived experience of a community distinct from the institutional and ideological organization of the society—in the works of poets and novelists.



Discussions

- ◆ In the same vein, Williams sees most novels as “knowable communities” in the sense that the “novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways” (p. 163). In sum, Williams notably said: “It was always a limited inquiry: the country and the city within a single tradition. But it has brought me to the point where I can offer its meanings, its implications and its connections to others: for discussion and amendment; for many kinds of possible cooperative work; but above all for an emphasis—the sense of an experience and of ways of changing it—in the many countries and cities where we live” (p. 306).

Thank you

- ◆ Prepared by Mr. Milan Mondal
- ◆ Assistant Professor in English
 - ◆ Narajole Raj College
- ◆ Narajole, Paschim Medinipur

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