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Cultural Studies

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Why do literature students need to know about cultural studies? There are two main reasons. Firstly, cultural studies is partly responsible for the shape of the syllabus in many English departments in the twenty-first century. It was involved in the challenge to the traditional 'canon' of 'Great Works' by DWEMS (Dead White European Males). Cultural studies, therefore, is partly responsible for the fact that somewhere in your department people will be studying (get ready either to cheer or sneer) *Harry Potter*, or Stephen King, or Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1997). Although this might not seem especially contentious nowadays, just a few decades ago the idea that students might study graphic novels (that's the posh term for comics) or Hollywood adaptations of Shakespearean drama would have made most academics apoplectic (that's the posh term for *very* angry). A second reason why cultural studies is relevant to literature students is that it has been at the forefront of developing a distinctive approach to texts which is interdisciplinary, self-consciously theoretical and politicised. The 'cultural studies approach' has been imported into literary criticism and you are certain to encounter it at some stage in your secondary reading.

What is Cultural Studies?

So now we know *why* cultural studies is important for literature students but we don't know yet *what* it is. This is a little harder. Cultural studies is difficult to define succinctly because it incorporates a range of critical practices that cross disciplinary boundaries. The 'cultural studies approach' can be found in literary, film and media studies, sociology, politics and geography, the study of different racial and ethnic groups as well as women's studies, lesbian and gay studies. In addition to appearing in a variety of subject areas, cultural studies is also associated with a wide range of critical theories that includes marxism and feminism, postcolonialism and psychoanalysis, structuralism and post-structuralism. This dizzying array of –isms and –ologies can be intimidating to the student, but fortunately there are some key words and common denominators which can help us to sketch a working definition of this field.

To begin with, cultural studies is characterised by an expansive definition of its own key term. Instead of seeing 'culture' as a restricted collection of canonical works (Shakespeare's tragedies, Beethoven's symphonies etc.), cultural studies embraces popular culture in all of its guises. Cultural studies thus offers a combative challenge to the notion that 'culture' means 'high culture' – the 'timeless' classics often associated with a privileged elite – and instead explores the everyday and often ephemeral cultural experiences of the masses. This approach is illustrated well by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) - a ground-breaking collection of essays that offers quirky and effervescent readings of, amongst other things, wrestling, steak and chips, the 'New Citroen' and the face of screen idol Greta Garbo.

Literary Cultural Studies

In the literary context, cultural studies encourages us to turn to genres that have traditionally been neglected within the academy: comic books and women's magazines, westerns and weblogs as well as a range of non-canonical fictions. Instructive examples of the turn to popular fiction can be found in Janice Radway's (1991) *Reading the Romance* and Michael Denning's (1987) *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-class Culture in America*. Cultural studies does not turn its back entirely on the canonical and will sometimes manufacture jarring juxtapositions that place, for example, Shakespeare alongside *The Simpsons*, or *Heart of Darkness* next to *Tarzan of the Apes*. This latter combination appears in Antony Easthope's (1991) *Literary into Cultural Studies*. Easthope interweaves the seminal modernist novel by Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*) with Edgar Rice Burroughs' pulp fiction (*Tarzan of the Apes*) to investigate the clash of high and popular culture, definitions of 'literariness' and literary value and how each text relates to racist ideology and the history of colonialism in Africa. In their assault on the canon and *Belles Lettres*, cultural studies critics like Easthope tend to approach all cultural production in terms of 'text' and 'discourse' with a politically charged focus on categories such as class, gender, race and sexuality. Cultural studies can thus be succinctly defined as a mode of textual critique which concentrates on issues of power. This critical practice is underpinned by a sense of culture as a battlefield on which the dominant groups in society seek to impose their will whilst subordinate groups attempt to resist the powerful and invent new identities for themselves.

A Brief History of Cultural Studies

The origins of cultural studies can be traced back to the 1950s and a trio of left-wing academics working in British universities. Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, the founding fathers of British cultural studies, sought to recover and valorise working class history and culture. Their work was given added urgency by a shared sense that, in the post-war period, working class traditions and culture were under threat from a burgeoning mass media and culture industry that was increasingly transnational and 'Americanised'. It was partly to counter this development that Hoggart founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in 1964. Initially under the directorship of Hoggart (1964-68) and then the British-West Indian critic Stuart Hall (1968-79), the Centre became an institutional base for academics keen to offer critiques of contemporary British culture. Throughout the 60s and 70s, the CCCS exerted a powerful influence on British academic and cultural life. It is worth noting that the work produced by the CCCS was itself influenced by a number of continental critics. Alongside Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) and the work of Michel Foucault, marxist critical thinking continued to have a defining influence. British cultural studies incorporated work by Mikhail Bakhtin, the Frankfurt School (especially Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin), Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci to refine the marxist understanding of culture. An increasingly sophisticated sense of the relationships between economics, culture, various institutions and ideology replaced the 'vulgar' marxist notion of culture as merely a tool of social control deployed by the ruling classes to manufacture consent (the process of 'hegemony'). In place of a static and monolithic entity, 'culture' came to be seen as a dynamic and contradictory realm in which 'dominant', 'residual' and 'emergent' forces collided (this model and these terms are explained by Raymond Williams (1977) in *Marxism and Literature*).

From the late 60s onwards, British cultural studies began to move from a preoccupation with class towards issues of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity. This broadening of range was a response to the social struggles and political movements of the 60s and the 70s (women's rights and gay liberation, the struggle for racial equality and postcolonial politics). Since the 70s, cultural studies has become increasingly conspicuous with new departments, courses, journals and criticism appearing in the US and Latin America, Asia and Africa, Europe and Australia. This field will be of particular

interest to students of literature who are keen to connect literary art to other forms of cultural production in relation to questions of politics and power.

Further reading

Barthes, Roland (1993), *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. London: Vintage.

Brantlinger, Patrick (1990), *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America*. London & New York: Routledge.

Denning, Michael (1987), *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-class Culture in America*. London: Verso.

During, E Simon (2007), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (3rd edition). London: Routledge.

Easthope, Antony (1991), *Literary into Cultural Studies*. London & New York: Routledge.

Fiske, John (1989), *Understanding Popular Culture*. London & New York: Routledge.

Fiske, John (1989), *Reading the Popular*. London & New York: Routledge.

Hall, Stuart (ed.) (1980), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. London & New York: Routledge.

Hall, Stuart (ed.) (1997), *Representation: Cultural representations and Signifying Practices*. London & New York: Routledge.

Stuart Hall is one of the architects of cultural studies and has done as much as anyone working in this field to underline the fundamentally political nature of culture. *Culture, Media, Language* is a collection of key essays from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. There are three contributions here from Hall including his own assessment of the CCCS and the seminal 'Encoding/Decoding'. The sections on 'Language' and 'English Studies' will be of particular interest to literature students. In *Representation*, Hall and his co-contributors offer accounts of the production and exchange of meaning through language and image that are both intricate and pellucid.

Radway, Janice (1984), *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

<http://www.theory.org.uk/>

Primarily aimed at media studies students, but the 'resources' section offers useful introductions to key thinkers and terms from the cultural studies vocabulary.

Williams, Raymond (1963), *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Williams, Raymond (1983), *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana.

Williams, Raymond (1977), *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

First published in 1958, *Culture and Society* is one of Williams' most influential works and is credited with the introduction of the phrase 'cultural studies'. Williams moves authoritatively from the Romantics to Orwell and traces critical developments in the meanings of 'culture' as it intersects with art and literature, class and ideology, industry and democracy. *Keywords* is an invaluable tool for students wanting concise definitions of terms from the critical vocabulary of literary and cultural studies. This volume is now over thirty years old, but retains its relevance and validity. (NB. The student looking for a more up-to-date complementary text is advised to consult Julian Wolfreys' (2004) *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory*).

Wolfreys, Julian (2004), *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory*. Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.