

# Raymond Williams and the Contemporary Transformation Path of British Marxist Literary Theory

Zheng Zhang

Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

zhangwints@163.com

**Abstract.** With the global expansion and quasi-disciplinary development of cultural studies and cultural criticism, the name Raymond Williams has gradually become a commonly used term, often representing early British cultural studies. As one of the representative figures of cultural studies, Williams made immeasurable contributions to the rise and development of the discipline, occupying an irreplaceable position in the field. Although he and Karl Marx—the founder of Marxist theory—lived in different eras, their ideas intersected and merged in the soil of British cultural studies, jointly shaping the unique character of British Marxist literary theory. This paper delves into Williams's theoretical contributions to British Marxist literary theory and explores how he has guided its contemporary transformation, injecting new vitality into the field.

**Keywords:** British Marxist Literary Theory; Structure of Feeling; Common Culture.

## 1. A Brief Introduction to Raymond Williams



**Figure 1.** Raymond Williams

Raymond Williams, one of the most significant Marxist cultural critics in the English-speaking world in the mid-20th century, was born into the working class in rural Wales. He eventually entered one of Britain's top academic institutions—Cambridge University—where he gained multiple cultural identities: Professor of Drama at Jesus College, Cambridge; one of the most important Marxist cultural critics of the mid-20th century; a foundational figure in cultural studies; a core figure of the British Left; and, after his death, he was praised as "the most important socialist thinker, intellectual, and cultural activist in post-war Britain."

As a renowned British cultural theorist and Marxist thinker, Williams engaged deeply with a wide range of theoretical and practical issues throughout his life, including literature, art, politics, mass media, philosophy, and history. His distinctive studies on the socialist movement and Marxist thought led to the development of the influential theory of "cultural materialism," which has had a profound impact on contemporary Marxism and cultural studies. Figure 1.

## 2. Williams's Theoretical Exploration of British Marxist Literary Theory

Williams's exploration of British cultural Marxist literary theory runs through the three major stages of the development of British cultural Marxism (see Table 1), where he played a key transitional role.

**Table 1.** The Developmental Stages of Williams’s Exploration of British Marxist Literary Theory

Stage	Content Overview
Early stage	Williams and others co-initiated "culturalism", absorbing traditional theories and promoting its formation, emphasizing culture, history, practice and experience.
	Affirming mass reading, developing adult education, applying historical materialism, and endowing cultural features.
Middle stage	Structuralism turned to "cultural hegemony", and British culture turned to Marxism.
	Williams sought common ground while sheding differences in structuralism, affirmed in criticism and made adjustments.
Third stage	The role of culture is important, the research horizon is open, the theory of postmodernism is absorbed, and postmodernism is turned.
	Integration of new theoretical resources, towards "discourse analysis", Williams concept of "engagement" as the basis.

### 2.1 Early Stage

In the early phase of British cultural Marxism, Williams, along with Richard Hoggart and E. P. Thompson, initiated the "culturalism" movement, emphasizing culture, real history, praxis, and strong experiential elements, which inspired revolutionary motivation within the working class. Influenced by traditional British cultural criticism and Marxist historiography, Williams promoted the formation of "culturalism" through a critical absorption of both traditions [1-3].

He affirmed that mass reading benefited the overall intellectual development of the working class and sought to reshape working-class cultural levels through adult education. Drawing on the research methods of British Marxist historians, Williams applied historical materialism to examine concrete historical and real-world problems, placing particular emphasis on analyzing the daily lives of ordinary people. His application of this method to the study of "culture" endowed the concept with empirical, everyday, and subjective characteristics, resonating with historiographical theories and providing fruitful insights for early cultural studies.

### 2.2 Middle Stage

To address the theoretical shortcomings of early culturalism, structuralism marked a turning point in cultural studies, aligning with Gramsci’s concept of "cultural hegemony." Under the leadership of figures like Perry Anderson, British cultural Marxism underwent a significant turn toward structuralism. Structuralism, which places ideology at its core, interprets both "culture" and "ideology" as products of structure. This approach inevitably strips culture of its subjectivity, agency, and experiential richness.

While structuralism undoubtedly elevated cultural studies to a new theoretical level—offering greater generalizability than culturalism—its closed and circular structure inadvertently neglected the material reality of social history, becoming its most fatal flaw. Faced with this overcorrection, first-generation New Left theorists responded in varied ways. Williams adopted a critical yet inclusive stance toward structuralism, recognizing its theoretical merits while also adjusting his own theories accordingly.

### 2.3 Third Stage

As the role of culture grew increasingly significant and the horizons of cultural studies expanded to include postmodern theories, British cultural Marxism entered its postmodern phase. During this period, cultural studies incorporated and synthesized new theoretical resources including post-Marxism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, media theory, and semiotics. This shift led to a new mode of "discourse analysis," wherein history, culture, society, and politics were all viewed as irreducibly "discursive" constructs [4-6].

As a discourse theory, the concept of "articulation" became central to post-Marxism, used to understand the processes and activities involved in meaning-making, value construction, relationships, identity, and orientation. In fact, post-Marxist articulation theory was expanded upon through interpretations of Williams’s original concept of "articulation." For Williams, articulation meant "expression" or "elaboration"—a socially embedded mode of cultural material production. He viewed

language as an agentive, experiential articulation, laying the groundwork for the formation of articulation theory.

### **3. Raymond Williams and the Contemporary Transformation of British Marxist Literary Theory**

#### **3.1 Text-Centered Critical Practice**

Marxist literary theory originates from Marxist philosophy and is one of its central themes. With the theoretical strengths of dialectical and historical materialism, it has attracted many scholars. However, due to historical limitations, early British Marxist literary criticism often bore traits of simplicity and mechanical interpretation. Lacking a deep engagement with literary texts in both attitude and methodology, early British Marxist literary criticism was relatively weak when compared with contemporary literary theories, failing to rival the dominant Leavisism.

Faced with what he described as a "state of confusion" in early British Marxist literary theory, Williams absorbed the tradition of British literary criticism with its emphasis on close textual analysis and applied this method in his own critical practice. Through this, British Marxist literary theory gradually gained ground and emerged as a new frontier of Western Marxist theory outside of Germany and France. Williams integrated the method of "close reading" from British literary criticism into Marxist literary analysis[7-8]. "Close reading," rooted in practical criticism, had a profound influence on Anglo-American literary criticism from the 1920s to the 1950s. Practical criticism emphasized the text itself rather than external factors like the author's biography or the social context, essentially serving as a reaction against classical criticism.

Although Williams was critical of practical criticism for evading ideological issues, he adopted the technique of "close reading" in his literary and cultural studies. While close reading forms the foundation of literary criticism, Williams believed it was insufficient on its own and sought to expand its scope beyond the text. This led to his development of Marxist historical semantics—a method of close reading that analyzes key words in the context of social and historical processes. Semantics studies the meaning of language, while historical semantics focuses on how meanings evolve within historical contexts to uncover deeper cultural and social implications. One of Williams's most important contributions to British Marxist literary theory lies in his attempt to integrate Marxist theory, close textual analysis, historical semantics, and even cultural anthropology. This synthesis formed the basis of his approach to literary and cultural theory, termed "Marxist historical semantic criticism." While early British Marxist literary theory, under Soviet influence, had become rigid and dogmatic, Williams's approach—by introducing close reading and creating a historical semantic method—overcame practical limitations and laid a solid foundation for the shift from literature to culture in British Marxist theory.

#### **3.2 From Literature to Culture: Expansion of Research Scope**

Among the developmental trajectories of British Marxist literary theory, Williams's cultural theory stands out. He led the theoretical transition from a focus on literature to a broader concern with culture, marking a significant "cultural turn." His theoretical contributions also provided a solid foundation for British cultural studies to become a distinct academic field.

The British concept of "culture" originated within the literary tradition. Although the term "cultural studies" emerged from the University of Birmingham, Britain has long maintained a deep cultural consciousness. According to Williams's analysis in *Culture and Society*, "the idea of culture, along with various modern usages of the word, entered British thought during what is known as the Industrial Revolution." Initially, the idea of culture was centered on literature—especially poetry—which was seen as an imaginative, creative endeavor charged with the task of maintaining the human spirit and perfecting humanity. Later, the concept of culture expanded from literature to encompass

entire ways of life. The importance of “culture” in shaping a healthy society gradually gained broader recognition [9-10].

At the end of *Culture and Society*, Williams summarizes his reflections on the idea of culture (see Table 2), stating: “Culture is not just a collection of works of knowledge and imagination; essentially, it is a whole way of life.” The key to distinguishing between different class cultures, he notes, lies not in everyday matters like clothing or food, but in the diverse understandings of the nature of social relationships.

**Table 2.** Summary of Williams’s Reflections on the Concept of “Culture”

Key points	Content
Definition of Culture	Culture is a holistic way of life, encompassing art, acquisition, institutions, and daily behavior.
Characteristics of culture	Productive: culture is a process of formation and composition, with creativity
	Dynamic: Culture is constantly evolving
	Diversity: Cultures have different characteristics and forms of expression
The Function of Culture	Social integration: Uniting members of society through shared values
	Identity: Provides individual and group identity bases
	Knowledge inheritance: Accumulation and inheritance of human experience and wisdom

Moreover, Williams reinterpreted the concept of “the masses,” arguing that “the masses” are not equivalent to “the mob,” and “mass culture” does not necessarily imply vulgar taste. Rather, it is a collective image shaped by the tendency to group people under fixed formulas—often for the purpose of political or cultural exploitation. In *Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory*, Williams proposed that literature has always been a form of social practice and a contribution to mainstream culture. The formation and development of different literary forms—such as novels and poetry—occur within the broader cultural field. In addition to literature, visual and auditory arts, as well as emerging cultural forms like radio, film, and television, all participate in the formation of dominant culture and increasingly exert significant influence.

While affirming the value of literature and continuing the British tradition of literary-cultural analysis, Williams also analyzed key ideological terms such as “the masses” to reclaim the value of “mass culture.” In doing so, he transcended the elitist cultural view rooted in British tradition and strengthened the capacity of Marxist literary theory to engage with reality and influence society.

### 3.3 From “Organic Community” to “Common Culture”: A Critical Direction

Literature is closely tied to social reality; it possesses aesthetic value and also serves to convey ideology, moral customs, and other cultural ideals. It is an indispensable form of culture. Specialized study of British literature began to develop rapidly in the late 19th century. One major reason for this was the intensifying class conflict caused by the rapid development of capitalism and the declining unifying power of religion. Literature, with its ability to evoke emotion and shared experience, gradually became an effective tool for uniting various social strata and fostering national pride.

For Williams, literary studies were not the ultimate goal but a foundation for advancing his broader cultural and political ideals. Throughout his career, literature remained a core domain within his cultural studies. His concepts of historical semantic criticism and “structures of feeling” exemplify this research trajectory. Ultimately, Williams’s literary research aimed to construct a vision of “common culture.” In this sense, the ideal of an “organic community” celebrated by traditional literary thought served as a starting point and basis for his concept of “common culture.” [11-12]

However, in a culture dominated by the “minority,” many ordinary people are unable to participate meaningfully; they can only passively accept what is presented, leaving society fragmented at least in the spiritual sense. Williams argued that culture is open both structurally and in terms of meaning, and no single person or discipline can effectively represent or manage it alone. In his vision, “the characteristic of a common culture is that choices are made freely and collectively—or reselected freely and collectively,” rather than dictated by “our own structure to determine others’ directions.”

Thus, the realization of a “common culture” is based on and oriented toward the promotion of democracy and equality. It reflects Williams’s Marxist political ideal of building a united and equal social community. His notion of “common culture” emphasizes the functional role of culture and points toward problem-solving approaches that extend beyond literature to the broader public. This surpasses the Leavisite imagination of an “organic community” derived solely from literary value and reflects a practical orientation grounded in the cultural ideals of Marxism.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, Raymond Williams’s theoretical contributions have had profound significance for the development and innovation of British Marxist literary theory. His work not only enriched the theoretical content of Marxist literary criticism but also provided valuable intellectual resources for future cultural scholars. As one of the most outstanding achievements of twentieth-century British Marxist literary theory, Williams’s cultural theory represents both a methodological innovation and a visionary construction of cultural ideals. His theory is composed of literary criticism based on textual analysis, cultural theory centered on literature and “structures of feeling,” and the practical ideal of a “common culture.” Williams’s theoretical contributions to cultural studies are foundational and pioneering. His theories continue to be reinterpreted globally, and his academic value is continuously rediscovered, offering new vitality to the ongoing development of British Marxist literary theory.

#### References

- [1] Clarke, G. (2007). Defending ski jumpers: A critique of theories of youth sub-cultures. In A. Gray, J. Campbell, M. Erickson, S. Hanson, & H. Wood (Eds.), *CCCS selected working papers* (Vol. 2, pp. 230–256). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1982).
- [2] Connell, R. (1995). *Masculinities*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- [3] Crawford, K. (2010). Buying in: On adulthood and homeownership ideologies. In J. Burnett (Ed.), *Contemporary adulthood: Calendars, cartographies and constructions* (pp. 39–55). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [4] Devine-Frances, B. (2020, November 10). Average earnings by age and region. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8456/>.
- [5] Eagleton, T. (1989). *Raymond Williams: Critical perspectives*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [6] Fiori, F., Graham, E., & Feng, Z. (2020). Inequalities in the transition to homeownership among young people in Scotland. *Housing Studies*, 35(3), 506–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2019.1614537>.
- [7] Moreno, A., & Urraco, M. (2018). The generational dimension in transitions: A theoretical overview. *Societies*, 8(3), 49. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc8030049>.
- [8] Nilsen, A. (2021). Independence and relationality in notions of adulthood across generations, gender and social class. *The Sociological Review*, 69(1), 123–138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120931425>.
- [9] Nowell, L., Norris, J., White, D., & Moules, N. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.
- [10] O’Neill, R. (2018). *Seduction: Men, masculinity, and mediated intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [11] Read-Thurnell, T. (2011). Off the leash and out of control: Masculinities and embodiment in Eastern European stag tourism. *Sociology*, 45(6), 977–991. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511419191>.
- [12] Roberts, K. (2007). Youth transitions and generations: A response to Woodman and Wyn. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10(2), 263–269.