

مفهوم الثقافة في الكتابات النقدية للناقد إف
آر ليفيز

The Concept of Culture in F. R. Leavis's
Critical Writings

د. عبدالحميد احمد ناصر المدري¹

Dr. Abdul Hamid Ahmed Nasser

Al-Madari²

<https://doi.org/10.54582/TSJ.2.2.43>

(1) استاذ الادب الانجليزي المساعد بقسم اللغة الانجليزية - كلية الادب والعلوم الانسانية - جامعة
اقليم سبأ

عنوان المراسلة : almadari2015@yahoo.com

(2) Assistant Professor of English Literature - Department
of English Language - Faculty of Arts and Humanities - Saba
Region University



تعد الثقافة كمظلة تندرج تحتها العديد من المفاهيم كالسلوك الاجتماعي والمعرفة والمعتقدات والعادات والتقاليد. اضيف الى ذلك ان مفهوم الثقافة هو احد المفاهيم التي نوقشت ودرست من قبل العديد من النقاد، ومن بينهم إف آر ليفز. يهدف البحث الحالي الى تحليل مفهوم الثقافة في كتابات إف آر ليفز النقدية ومعرفة ملاحظاته التي قدمها حول تعريف الثقافة. إن أهمية هذا البحث تكمن في كونه يفتح نافذة جديدة حول كتابات إف آر ليفز النقدية. يرى ليفز أنه لا يملك الثقافة إلا النخبة المتعلمة، وأن المثقف هو ذلك الشخص الذي يهتم بدراسة الأدب والفن، حيث وهما يمثلان كل ما هو جميل في المورث الثقافي، لذلك وقف ليفز معارضا للماركسية لأنها تنتج أدب يذل الروح الانسانية، وقد عبر ليفز عن عدم رضاه للمجتمع الصناعي وذلك بسبب ظهور الاشكال الثقافية الجديدة كالتلفزيون والافلام والكمبيوتر والإنترنت التي شكلت تهديدا للثقافة المعاشة؛ أي أن هذه الاشكال الثقافية الجديدة لها تأثير سلبي كبير على الثقافات المحلية. وهنا يمكن القول أن ليفز ضيق الأفق وامتدد في تحليله لمفهوم الثقافة، حيث كان من المفترض أن لا يحدده الثقافة في النخبة المتعلمة، وأن يقبل بالاشكال الثقافية الجديدة حيث ولها وجود فعلي لا يمكن تجاهله.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة، ليفز، الكتابات النقدية، النخبة





Abstract

Culture is an umbrella term under which come many things such as social behavior, knowledge, beliefs, habits, and customs. The concept of culture is one of the concepts that discussed and examined by different critics, among whom is F. R. Leavis. The current research paper is aimed at analyzing the concept of culture in F. R. Leavis's critical writings and his notes towards the definition of culture. This research paper opens a new window to the study of Leavis's critical works. For Leavis, culture is only attainable by the educated elite. He stated that the cultured man is the one who is interested in literature and arts, and literature and arts represent what is good in the tradition of culture. Therefore, he opposed Marxism because it creates a literature that humiliates the human spirit. He also declared his dissatisfaction with the industrial society because of the emergence of the new cultural forms such as television, films, computer, and internet such as television, films, computer, and internet, which pose a threat to the living culture. That is to say, these new forms of culture are harmful because they have great impact on the local cultures. In brief, Leavis is narrow and dogmatic in his analysis of the concept of culture. He is supposed not to confine culture to the educated elite and to accept the new cultural forms because they have their actual existence that cannot be ignored.

Keywords: culture, Leavis, critical writings, elite





The Concept of Culture in F. R. Leavis's Critical Writings

Introduction

Culture is a way of life that distinguishes one group of people from another. The concept of culture becomes dominant and widely spread in the field of cultural studies and then in the field of cultural criticism after the first half of the twentieth century. In these fields, culture is approached and comprehended as practices, power, high or low cultures, popular and mass, etc.

Chronologically speaking, the word culture is derived from the Latin origin meaning cultivation or nurture; it came to actual use as an English term during the Middle Ages. Later on, it is used in the field of humanities after the first half of the eighteenth century. According to *Encarta Dictionaries*, culture is defined as “the beliefs, customs, practices, and social behavior of a particular nation or people.” It also refers to “the ideas, beliefs, and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a society” (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2003). There are many writers who tried to define the concept of culture, but they did not arrive at unified definition of it, and F. R. Leavis is one of them.

F. R. Leavis is one of the celebrated British critics of the twentieth century. He contributed to English literary criticism by





injecting seriousness into the modern English studies. He believed that the twentieth century witnessed a cultural decline. Therefore, culture is kept by the educated elite. In his critical writings, Leavis concentrates on the nature of poetry, the nature of fiction, and the nature of culture in the British society.

The fascination of F. R. Leavis grows out of his literary and critical writings. Leavis has a unique perspective concerning the concept of culture. He is one of the conservative critics, who believe that the cultural tradition is to be protected. This research paper aims to study the concept of culture in F. R. Leavis's critical writings and analyze his notes towards the definition of culture. The importance of this research paper lies in the notion that it opens a new window to the study of Leavis's critical writings, and it tends to be a holistic study concerning the concept of culture in Leavis's critical writings.





Literature Review

Many critics approach Leavis's critical writings from different perspectives. They were and are still a subject of interest to a lot of them. In this concern, Michael Payne and Jessica Rae Barbara (2010: 411) state that Leavis is one of the excellent participants in English debates about culture. He defended a sublime model of culture against the menace from mass culture and science.

He revised, and severely restricted, the Canon of English literature in *Revaluation* (1936) and *The Great Tradition* (1948), employing a strong form of Moral criticism partly inherited from Arnold. His general cultural criticism lamented the destruction of the English rural "organic community," whose values survived only in the literary tradition.

And about Leavis's *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1933) and his later works, they (2010: 411) also write:

In this model, the shared national culture and vibrant language of Shakespeare's time has broken down, under pressures from popular education and journalism, into a sterile "high" culture . . . and a mindless "low" culture of cinema and pulp fiction.

John Hartley (2003: 32), in his explication of culture from Arnold to Schwarzenegger, mentions the role of F. R. Leavis in the fields of cultural studies and literary criticism.





For forty years between the 1930s and the 1960s, Leavis drummed out the same message – English Literature was the moral centre of the school curriculum; and he demonstrated in his publications how he thought literary criticism ought to be done, in the cause of preserving the language and ‘fine’ responses to it.

That is to say, the moral values are to be a criterion of evaluation and have to be taken into consideration when evaluating any literary text. Hartley (2003: 32) adds: “Later the Leavisite ‘resistance’ to mass society was recast as class struggle, where the enemy was still commercial media and popular culture, but the good guys were intellectuals rather than poets; political radicals rather than literary missionaries.”

In his discussion of the history of cultural studies, Simon During (2005: 20) refers to some of the advocates of British cultural studies such as Richard Hoggart, F. R. Leavis, and William Raymond. Concerning Leavis, During states that cultural studies got developed by Leavis.





Leavis's Critical Writings and Career

Frank Raymond Leavis is a very prominent cultural critic. He was a cultural critic and educator, who devoted his criticism to struggling the intricate moral problems of everyday life. He also criticized modern commercialism. In 1929, Leavis married one of his students, Queenie Roth, and this union resulted in a productive collaboration which yielded many great critical works.

The first major volume of criticism that Leavis published was *New Bearings in English Poetry*. It provides insight into his own critical positions. It is a critical examination of Victorian moralism and a pioneering analysis of techniques used by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

F. R. Leavis joined the American school of New Critics: a group of critics that promotes a close reading and textual analysis of the text believing that a text is a thing in itself, and advocating that this is the only way through which truth can be arrived at. In this regard, M. A. R. Habib (2005: 564) remarks: "like them [New Critics], he believed that literary criticism should be a serious and separate discipline . . . he repeatedly insisted that literature should be approached *as* literature and not as a social, historical, or political document." No longer then, Leavis refuses to admit the principles advocated by the new critics. He believed that a poem cannot be isolated from the culture of the society. He ultimately





distinguished himself from this group.

Leavis published, in 1933, *For Continuity*, which is a selection of *Scrutiny* essays. His first published book was *Culture and Environment* in (1933), written in conjunction with Denys Thompson. *Education and the University* was published in 1943. In 1948, Leavis's *The Great Tradition* appeared; a work in which he focused his attention on fiction and made his general statement about the English novel. A book edited by Leavis entitled *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge* was published in 1950. Leavis's *The Common Pursuit* is a collection of critical essays published in *Scrutiny* in 1952. In 1970, a critical work on Dickens entitled *Dickens: The Novelist* was published. This book was written in collaboration with his wife Q. D. Leavis. His final volumes of criticism are *Nor Shall My Sword* (1972), *The Living Principle* (1975) and *Thought, Words and Creativity* (1976).

Leavis was regarded as one of the most influential and leading figures in twentieth-century English literary criticism, especially cultural criticism. His seriousness in his critical writings shaped the English and American academies. He was known for his decisive critical remarks against some writers. Commenting on the one who works as a critic, Leavis (*Revaluation*, 1969: 9) admits: "Any one who works strenuously in the spirit of this conception [criticism] must expect to be accused of being both dogmatic and





narrow, though, naturally, where my own criticism is concerned I think the accusations unfair.” His frank judgments were definitely frank as much as his first name Frank Raymond Leavis. In short, Leavis's judgments about some works and his critical approaches to literature made a great conflict among academic intellectual in a number of countries.

Leavis's literary criticism in general and cultural criticism in particular can be traced according to four historical stages. The first stage is his first publication including his book *Revaluation* which was published in 1936. This book was planned, F. R. Leavis (*Revaluation*, 1969: 1) declares, “when I was writing my *New Bearings in English Poetry*, which offers an account of the situation as it appears to-day”. His main focus during this stage was English poetry from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century. Explaining the aim of the book *Revaluation* in which he starts with Carew, Cowley, and Herrick and ends with Keats, F. R. Leavis (*Revaluation*, 1969: 2) states in its introduction that,

My aim does not compromise exhaustiveness; on the contrary, it involves a strict economy. It is to give as clearly as can be given without misleading simplification the main lines of development in the English tradition_ to give, as it were, the essential structure.

Regarding the eighteenth century, Leavis states in his book *The Common Pursuit* (1972: 192) that,





The eighteenth century, significantly, had a habit of attempting the naïve, and, characteristically, evoked its touching simplicities of low life in modes that, Augustan tone and movement being inescapable, evoked at the same time the elegant and polite.

In this connection, Dr Wellek has written some critical remarks against Leavis; some of which is related to the eighteenth century romantic poets. It is Leavis's "lack of interest in philosophy" that makes him treat the romantic poets unfairly (qtd. in Leavis's *The Common Pursuit*, 1972: 216).

In the second stage, Leavis shifted to fiction. He wrote critical books some of which is *The Great Tradition* (1948). This book is a group of collected essays in which Leavis discussed the English novel as a criticism of the contemporary life and identified four novelists: Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad. In the third stage Leavis discussed issues related to literature, society, and education. Such discussion is very clear in his book *Nor Shall My Sword* (1972). The final stage includes his last writings: *The Living Principle: 'English' as a Discipline of Thought* (1975), and *Thought, Words and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence* (1976). In this connection, George Watson (2001: 212) points out:

The later career of Leavis, indeed, suggests a corruption of an unusual kind. Unlike Eliot, he never retreated. But he remained in





the same positions so obstinately that one suspected he was there at all only out of force of habit, and his vehemence under attack , while his absolute refusal to admit honest errors of judgement sapped the confidence of his most serious admirers.

Leavis's Analysis of Culture

F. R. Leavis was one of those who downgraded the value of new forms of culture such as television, film, cinema, radio, and mass-circulation newspapers because they undermine the old forms of culture such as folklore, folk dancing, folksongs, and handcrafts, which are, for him, instrumental in bringing the whole society together. During his lifetime, Leavis attacked the evils of the mass community, as he called them. He labeled the term “technological-Benthamite” to this type of community. In this regard, Lesley Johnson (1979: 95) affirms that Leavis found

films and mass advertising to be equally insidious aspects of this process of ‘leveling-down’. Leavis continued to be suspicious and antagonistic towards films throughout his life. He refused to consider them as an art form. even though such a high level of creative activity has been channelled into film making over the years. He believed them to involve a surrender to cheap emotional thrills under conditions of hypnotic receptivity.

It is by the death of Wordsworth that industrialism, as Leavis in his book *The Common Pursuit* (1972: 192) states, “had done its





work, and the traditional culture of the people was no longer there, except vestigially” (193). In this respect, Leavis adds in the same book that, “No one, then, seriously interested in modern literature can feel that it represents a satisfactory cultural order.”

Concerning the interpretation of the concept of culture, Lesley Johnson (1979: 201-02) argues that, “Leavis interpreted culture as a moral force in society in terms similar to those of the romantic poets of the early nineteenth century. With special access to the realm of truth, the artistic imagination was a force for the betterment of society.” However, Leavis, Lesley Johnson (1979: 202) declares, could not succeed in giving “the vitality or confidence” which has been expressed in Arnold’s writing. Lesley Johnson (1979: 202) adds: “In Leavis’s work the concept [of culture] lacked coherence; at times it appeared to be the pursuit of an ideal and at other times it was identified with the actual objects or artefacts whose appreciation should promote this pursuit.”

Like Mathew Arnold, F. R. Leavis believed that literary education can be seen as a means of encouraging moral sensibility. That is to say, they saw that literature must have a moral function. According to Leavis, “literature,” Lesley Johnson (1979: 93) states, “cannot be separated from life.” It is worth mentioning that Leavis supported Mathew Arnold’s statement that literature is a ‘criticism of life’. Accordingly, Edgar and Peter (2002: 130) points





out that, "Leavis believed that literary training would help people to resist the allurements of popular culture. The study of literature would help to keep alive that tradition of 'picked experiences' that was being eroded in the modern world." Furthermore, M. A. R. Habib (2005: 564) points out that, "he [F. R. Leavis] repeatedly insisted that literature should be approached *as* literature and not as a social, historical, or political document."

In his discussion of the concept of culture and its importance, F. R. Leavis (*Education and the University*, 1943: 143) claimed that, "In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is (apart from cases of the simple and familiar) only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-hand judgment." According to this interpretation of culture one can understand that there are two substitutes for it: first, culture is confined to the minority; here, Simon During (2005: 24-25) writes that "minority culture meant the beleaguered literary culture of those charged with resisting mass communication"; second, culture is the discerning appreciation of art and literature. This means that it is the elite that can be taken to represent the culture of society. For Leavis, culture is the possession of the well-educated elite, and not the possession of the whole society. The well-educated are those who appreciate art and literature. Further, Leavis insisted that English literature has an important moral position in the modern English university.





Leavis explicated that the relationship between traditional culture and the literary tradition is that they are not exactly identical, but no one of them can survive without the other. If there is no culture, there will be no literature, and vice versa. And the base of culture is language because it is the only means through which our spiritual moral and emotional tradition can be communicated and conveyed with literature as their container and preserver (Lesley Johnson, 1979: 103). In *The Common Pursuit*, Leavis (1972: 192-93) remarks: "To have a vital literary culture we must have a literature that is a going concern; and that will be what, under present conditions of civilization, it has to be. Where it is can be determined only by the literary critic's kind of judgment."

Here, Leavis confirms the importance of the study of literature through which the study of culture can be amenable. In an article published in *Scrutiny* under the title of "The Responsible Critic," Leavis (1953: 174) remarks that, "I do indeed . . . think that the study of literature should be associated with extra-literary studies." In another article entitled "Mill, Beatrice Webb and the English School," Leavis (1949: 104-5) declares that to be interested in literature or literary criticism as a discipline of intelligence is to inevitably be led to other fields of interest.

Leavis's conception of culture is formed through his literary criticism. Literary criticism, Leavis argued, has a vital role in





promoting the human values because literature can stand for what is good in the tradition of culture. On the other hand, in an article published in *Scrutiny*, entitled "The Responsible Critic", Leavis (1953: 178-79) states that literature would not have a vital role in society if there is no influential public.

Leavis was in opposition to the ideas of Marxism. He criticized different aspects of it. Lesley Johnson (1979: 100) observed that F. R. Leavis "rejected the Marxist approach to literature as a serious threat to the humane tradition." In his book, *The Common Pursuit*, F. R. Leavis (1972: 183) states: "For if the Marxist approach to literature seems to me unprofitable, that is not because I think of literature as a matter of isolated works of art, belonging to a realm of pure literary values." Because of his opposition to the Marxist approaches to art and literature, Leavis rejected Arnold's notion that culture has a lot to do with society. Lesley Johnson also states that, "F. R. Leavis purported to agree with the Marxist position that culture should not be a possession of the bourgeoisie" (100). In other words, "Marxism, he [Leavis] claimed, provided too easy a salvation and means of explanation for the young intelligentsia" (Lesley Johnson, 1979: 101). In brief, Leavis was not satisfied by the implications of Marxism because of its ideologically revolutionary foundation and its endeavor to humiliate the spirits of human beings.





Leavis also explicated the importance of philosophy saying that it is valuable, but not as much like any aspect of culture. In his book *The Common Pursuit* (1972: 212) Leavis declares: “Literary criticism and philosophy seem to me to be quite distinct and different kinds of discipline at least, I think they ought to be.” Furthermore, Leavis elicited, through the criticism of Dr Wellek when he asked him to defend his position more abstractly, that philosophy is abstract and poetry is concrete (Leavis’s *The Common Pursuit*, 1972: 213). In other words, Leavis believed that literature is more dependable than philosophy. Discussing Wordsworth as a philosopher and as a poet, in “The Literary Mind” Leavis (1953: 26) states: “But we ought never to forget that Wordsworth matters as a ‘thinker’ only (if at all) because he is a poet.” In this regard, Christopher Norris (2002: 20) states: “Leavis rejects the idea that criticism need concern itself with epistemological problems, or rhetorical modes of working, implicit in literary texts. His ideal critic works within a discipline defined by qualities of responsiveness and intuitive tact, rather than subtlety of philosophic grasp.”

Leavis suggested the establishment of the English School which is responsible for the culture of the society and spreading consciousness and awareness among individuals. He believed strongly that such a school could work as a sacred group for the rest of the society. Here Lesley Johnson (1979: 104) remarks: “Leavis sought to compensate for his greater sense of isolation by creating





a coterie of students around him at Cambridge, and he attempted to establish the base for what he believed an English School of a university should be in the journal *Scrutiny*.” Moreover, Leavis firmly believed that it is the responsibility of the university to spread awareness and guidance and to establish a well-educated and responsible group of people. By education, the cultural tradition can be protected and preserved. Since the university is responsible for the education of the elite, the entrance of the university, Leavis suggested, must submit to some restrictions. Leavis was of the opinion that improvement at the university should precede improvement in the school.

In an article published in *Scrutiny*, entitled “Education and the University: Considerations at a Critical Time,” F. R. Leavis declares that he is concerned with liberal education at the level of university. In this article, Leavis (1943: 164-65) states:

The universities are recognized symbols of cultural tradition__ of cultural tradition still conceived as a directing force, representing a wisdom older than modern civilization and having an authority that should check and control the blind drive onward of material and mechanical development, with its human consequences. The ancient universities are more than symbols; they, at any rate, may fairly be called foci of such a force, capable, by reason of their prestige and their part in the life of the country, of exercising an





enormous influence.

In an article published in *Scrutiny* under the title of “Mill, Beatrice Webb and the English School”, Leavis (1949: 105-06) points out that he has “suggested in Education and the University what, in an English School that is really designed to promote the development of mature, energetic and creative minds, will replace the reliance on lectures and examinations. Leavis adds that he is not “proposing to recapitulate here” his “account of the methods of study-group, organized discussion and “pieces of work” which appears to him “necessary conditions any promising attack on the problem.”

F. R. Leavis agreed that Mr. Eastman is right when he says that the tradition of literary culture is dead, though Eastman, Leavis thought, did not intend so. On the other hand, Leavis (*The Literary Mind*, 1953: 21) disagreed with him pointing out: “If it was science that killed it [the tradition of literary culture], it was not in the way that Mr. Eastman explains, but by being the engine of the social changes that have virtually broken continuity.”





Conclusion

The concept of culture is discussed and explicated in different ways by different critics. Leavis's explication is obviously unique in certain ways. He believed that culture is not attainable by all, but by the educated elite. It is commonly agreed that an educated person is not necessary a cultured man; on the contrary, a cultured person must be an educated person. Leavis also declared that culture means the study of arts and literature. The other disciplines and approaches of knowledge, in his point of view, have nothing essential to do with culture and must be excluded. In other words, the cultured man is the one who is interested in art and literature. On the other hand, Leavis points out, to be interested in literature and arts is to necessarily be led to other fields of interest. It seems that Leavis is dogmatic and narrow in confining the concept of culture to two fields of knowledge ignoring the value of the other fields.





F. R. Leavis proclaimed his loyalty to culture because it is the dependable means that could preserve the tradition of society. On the other hand, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the modern industrial society in which science gained more popularity than literature. For Leavis, the scientific endeavor cannot be subsumed under the traditional culture. He was also opposed to the ideas of Marxism because of its ideological trend which is intended to humiliate the human spirit, which resulted in creating a literature of this sort.

For Leavis, art and life cannot be separated, and the aesthetic aspects of the texts are to be examined in view of the moral values. Culture, Leavis believed, is the moral force in the society, and literary education enhances this sort of moral awareness. It is by education that the cultural tradition can be maintained. And since the university is responsible for education, admission at the university is supposed to be restricted. He also insisted that criticism has to reflect the contemporary emotional responses. He believed that culture of the educated elite is superior to industrial revolution. He also admitted the significance of philosophy, but it cannot come close to the rank of culture because culture is seen as the highest point in the pyramid of civilization.





Leavis believed that the crown age is the age during which people in the British society were organic enjoying the lived culture of folk dancing and folk singing. Therefore, old forms of culture had been given priority, by Leavis, over the new forms, and they are far better than them. He believed that they pose a threat to the living culture. In the one hand, these new forms of culture such as television, films, computer, and internet are harmful because they have great impact on the local cultures. On the other hand, they can promote understanding and conformity among nations since they are multicultural means. Therefore, F. R. Leavis was supposed to promote them because they have actual existence.





Bibliography

- “Culture”, (2003). *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. 5th ed.
- During, Simon (2005). *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge – Taylor and Francis Group.
- Edgar, Andrew, and Peter Sedgwick, (2002). *Cultural Theory: The Key Thinkers*. London: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Habib, M. A. R, (2005). *A History of English Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Malden: Blakwell Publishing.
- Hartley, John, (2003). *A Short History of Cultural Studies*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Johnson, Lesley, (1979). *The Cultural Critics: From Mathew Arnold to Raymond Williams*. London: Rotledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kroeber, A. L. and Clyde Kluckhohn, (1952). *Culture: A Critical Review of Concept and Definitions*. New York: Random House.
- Leavis, F. R, (1969). *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Leavis, F. R, (1972). *The Common Pursuit*. London: Chatto and Windus.





Leavis, F. R, (1943). "Education and the University: Consideration at a Critical Time." *Scrutiny* 11.3: 162-67.

Leavis, F. R, (1949). "Mill, Beatrice Webb and the English School." *Scrutiny* 16.2: 104-26.

Leavis, F. R, (1953). "The Responsible Critic: or the Function of Criticism at any Time." *Scrutiny* 19.3: 162-83.

Leavis, F. R, (1953). "The Literary Mind." *Scrutiny* 1.1: 20-32.

Norris, Christopher, (2002). *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

Payne, Michael and Jessica Rae Barbara eds. (2010). *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*. 2nd ed. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Watson, George, (2001). *The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism*. Delhi: Doaba Publications.

