**Williams, Raymond (1921-1988)**

The critic, cultural historian and novelist Raymond Williams was an influential theorist of the emergence of literary and cultural modernism, and a key figure in the development of British literary and cultural theory. He is widely recognized as the founder of the discipline of cultural studies and of the theory of cultural materialism.

Born in the Welsh border village of Pandy in 1921, Williams attended Grammar School in Abergavenny, and then Cambridge University, where he resumed his studies in 1945 after military service. Following a period of teaching in adult education, Williams was appointed to a Chair in Drama at Cambridge University in 1961, which he occupied until his untimely death in 1988. Since the late 1930s, Williams had been drawn to German Expressionist film and the fiction of D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce. His interests in Naturalist drama and the movement beyond it into modernist experimentation are encoded in a sustained engagement with Ibsen’s work, first in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952), and then in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1969), the latter updated to include an account of the ‘complex seeing’ of Bertolt Brecht’s modernist stagecraft. Tony Pinkney, a key commentator on Williams and modernism, has gathered together Williams’ key essays on modernism into the posthumous volume *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (1989). Central to these essays is Williams’ theorisation of the close relationship between, on the one hand, the formation of avant-garde groups and the nature of their linguistic forms and innovations between the 1890s and 1920s and, on the other hand, the emergence of a metropolis characterised by immigration and the close intermingling of cultural identities.

While his early work from the mid-1940s combined the practical critical techniques of F.R. Leavis’ Cambridge school with a burgeoning socialism, Williams’ decisive breakthrough came with the publication of the major works *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). The former argued that the development of culture in British industrial society was too complex and dialogical to be contained in Arnoldian conceptions of ‘high’ art, giving rise instead to the proposition that ‘culture is ordinary’; the latter anatomised British culture on the verge of the 1960s and conceived of the unravelling of modernity since the eighteenth century as a combination of three revolutions – democratic, industrial and cultural – whose ‘long’ progress could only result in the gradual emancipation of human life. The embrace of cultural optimism, and a belief in the creative rather than deterministic potential of new technologies, characterizes Williams’ work from this point onwards, through key works in literary studies such as *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970), *The Country and the City* (1973) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977), and through works which helped to found a contemporary tradition in the analysis and sociology of culture, such as *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974), *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976/1984), *Culture* (1981) and *Towards 2000* (1983).

***Selected List of Works***

*Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1953, rev. 1964)

*Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958)

*The Long Revolution* (1961)

*Modern Tragedy* (1966)

*Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1968)

*The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970)

*The Country and the City* (1973)

*Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974)

*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976, 2nd edn 1984)

*Marxism and Literature* (1977)

*Culture* (1981)

*Towards 2000* (1983)

*The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (1989)

**Further Reading**

Dix, Hywel (2008) *After Raymond Williams: Cultural Materialism and the Break-up of Britain*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press

Eagleton, T. (ed.) (1989), *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, Cambridge: Polity

Higgins, John (1999), *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism*, London: Routledge

*Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism* 4 (2003)

Pinkney, T. (1991), *Raymond Williams*, Bridgend: Seren

Wallace, J., Jones, R. and Nield. S. (1997), *Raymond Williams Now: Knowledge, Limits and the Future*, Basingstoke: Macmillan

**Video material**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjlS66XJ1Bs>

**Image**

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[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/thumb/f/f2/Raymond\_Williams\_in\_1972.jpg/200px-Raymond\_Williams\_in\_1972.jpg](https://legacy.campus.gla.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=XPxVXdoB2UyJMotn5GBteicbQKBZrs9IPElmzJzeWqwgc3b-ffD-ojUe9op-ReUPxGpH1eRUTFA.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fupload.wikimedia.org%2fwikipedia%2fen%2fthumb%2ff%2ff2%2fRaymond_Williams_in_1972.jpg%2f200px-Raymond_Williams_in_1972.jpg" \t "_blank)

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