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Novels and Hegemony: An Intertwined Relationship of Cause and Effect

In today's society, the novel is the primary mode of fictional literary expression. Short stories and poetry have become secondary to the type of literature that develops a plot, typically over the course of several hundred pages and many chapters. The novel first became widespread in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and has continued to gain popularity. It is much more realistic than other literature, consisting of believable plots and character descriptions typical of everyday life. Perhaps more importantly, the novel has also historically focused on themes of virtue, morality, rationality, sensibility, and domestic life, and in its contemporary form, it continues to do so.

Many feel that novels have been and are an intimate part of creating societal change. Yet theories of the novel as a text and cultural hegemony would suggest that novels are actually reflecting norms that are in place and should remain as such. The believability factor of novels for modern day daily life creates an opportunity for the texts to focus on forming and perpetuating a hegemony, or culture of power. Hegemony, a term used in the literary world by several critics, is a dynamic force in society where several cultural forces are working together to create a dominant force. Marxist theory states that hegemony requires the manufactured consent of the people. "The 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequential confidence) which the dominant group

enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (1143). This manufactured consent is partially fostered in the reading of novels. As people in today’s society (and in past societies) purchase and read novels that present a thought or ideology, they are essentially giving consent to the ideology that the text puts forth, thereby perpetuating that ideology, which is often synonymous with beliefs of the dominant culture in society, resulting in hegemony.

Literary critics have pondered the novel, a relatively new mode of literary expression, attempting to discern whether it can be analyzed with conventional methods of literary analysis. Bakhtin, a Formalist, theorizes that a novel cannot be evaluated using traditional forms of analysis, because the literary form is too new and poetic elements typically used in analysis are part of ancient traditions. General theories of literature, however, suggest that there are ways of examining novelistic texts. These theories propose that literature serves a number of purposes, among them an expressive, a mimetic, and a didactic purpose. As an expressive text, literature results from an author’s inner being, and his texts express his innermost thoughts, beliefs, and desires. Texts that are didactic in nature are a source of knowledge, providing information to the reader, typically concerning morality and virtue. Mimetic texts are those that act as a mirror of nature and a representation of life. These theories alone provide the basis for the persistence of a hegemonic culture through novels, particularly if a currently dominant cultural force informs the author.

Other theories, more specific to literary analysis, also support the notion of cultural hegemony in novels, although they do so indirectly. Formalist theorists are among the few who directly address analyzing novels as textual entities. Bakhtin, as mentioned before, conjectured that novels could not be analyzed using poetic devices. Bakhtin also theorized other notions

concerning the novel, however. He defines the novel as a diverse range of social speech types/languages and a myriad of individual voices that are artistically organized. This organization is created by the author and serves the social purpose of the day. The dilemma that a critic faces is whether to recognize the novel as an inartistic or quasi-artistic genre, or to completely reconsider the conception of poetic discourse and its stylistic elements. Shpet, with whom Bakhtin disagrees, proposes the solution, “The recognition that contemporary forms of moral propaganda—i.e., the novel—do not spring from poetic creativity but are purely rhetorical compositions, is an admission, and a conception, that apparently cannot arise without immediately confronting a formidable obstacle in the form of a universal recognition, despite everything, that the novel does have a certain aesthetic value” (1196). In other words, many recognize that the text of a novel is aesthetic in nature, but this statement is in constant conflict with the idea that the novel is only a piece of propaganda. Bakhtin, of course, disagrees with this concept, as he feels that the novel is artistic in a way other texts cannot be, for only in a novel can an image achieve full complexity and depth. The novelist achieves this through the “use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions, to serve a second master” (1219).

Formalists focus on form and content for meaning and Bakhtin does this, but with a look to form and content of the novel for its meaning. For Bakhtin, the novel employs stylistics that are sociological in nature. This exposes the social discourse of the novel, with the social force determining the form, or structure of the novel, and the content, or material of the plot. Although poetic discourse is also social, it reflects lengthier social processes, which could take centuries to unfold entirely, while the novel approaches social processes that are subtler and occur more quickly in the surrounding environment.

Boris Eichenbaum, another Formalist theorist approaches the analysis of novels from a slightly different perspective. While Eichenbaum views novels as utilizing stylistic devices, particularly within the plot, he feels the use of these devices is related to the author's motivation. Motivation is a key aspect of novelistic prose for Eichenbaum, and he stresses the relationship between an author's motivation and technique. Therefore, the novel can be studied in terms of its story, or material, and its plot, or the structure. The message conveyed by the novel is entirely related to its form and content. For example, *Don Quixote*, which is told in episodic format, conveys its message best in this form, because the character's travels "motivate" this particular format. Eichenbaum also approaches texts from the idea of defamiliarization, which can be applied to any text. The concept signifies the process of making a familiar word, event, or image strange to typical perceptions that occur, thereby triggering a new response aesthetically. This idea counters the theory that hegemony is perpetuated through novelistic texts because through defamiliarization, an author can alter a reader's perception.

Yet other theories demonstrate that continuation of hegemony is entirely possible in novels. Phenomenological and Hermeneutical theorists approach texts somewhat differently from Formalism. Heidegger works within the framework of the text calling objects into existence. The reader is immersed in the text and it becomes a new consciousness for the reader. Instead of the form and content creating meaning, however, as in Formalist thought, phenomenologists and hermeneutics concentrate on language. Appropriation is the term these theorists use to describe the process of "thinging," or bringing objects within a text into existence through language. According to Formalists and Phenomenologists, language is also the method by which humans are defined. Humans do not speak through language, according to Phenomenology and Hermeneutic theory; rather, they are spoken by it. Consistent with this idea,

novels could enable cultural hegemony. Since language occurs prior to human existence, the language within a text could potentially create an ideology related to the normative in society.

Martin Heidegger, a prominent theorist of phenomenology and hermeneutics, created a metaphor of a threshold to depict the dialectical oppositions presented within a text. The threshold represents stability between absence and presence and mortality and divinity. The absences and presences the author constructs in the plot of a text create a subtext that convinces the reader of a normative value. The threshold, or stability, represents the normative, while stepping off the threshold symbolizes differences, instability, or a deviation from the norm.

Georges Poulet, a fellow Hermeneutic, built upon Heidegger's ideas of language creating existence for man and posited that as soon as a reader opens a book, the book ceases to exist and, to some extent, so does the reader. The book and the reader become engaged in a relationship established upon consciousness. The relationship between a text and reader is based upon the text's active invasion and the reader's passivity. A text invades a reader's consciousness. This process is similar to the spreading of propaganda, the survival of which is also based on the passivity of a population. Hegemony survives through propaganda and other ideologies that are spread by means of texts. Poulet's theory puts forth the idea that the passivity of a reader allows for ideologies present in a text to shift into the same reader's consciousness. The reader consents to this process with his/her passivity.

Another theorist of phenomenology and hermeneutics, E.D. Hirsch, has had many of his theories discounted, but there is something to be said about his idea distinguishing meaning from significance. Hirsch distinguishes between these two concepts, and for him, the author creates meaning and what the author means in the text is the only correct meaning. However, the text is subject to interpretations by the reader and is affected by social, historical, and personal

conditions, both for the author and the reader. Despite the dismissals of Hirsch's theories, his ideas could be construed as support for establishing a cultural hegemony. For Hirsch, the text is written in one context with a particular meaning and those same social and historical conditions that establish the context for the text affect the interpretation of the text. Thus, if social and historical conditions dictate a particular norm within a culture, then it is possible and likely that a novel may perpetuate an ideology because in order to interpret the text correctly, the reader must interpret the text according to the context in which it was written.

Though meaning is open for interpretation by the reader, Hirsch stresses that the author's meaning is the only correct meaning. He proffers the idea that meaning can be verified by ascertaining four different aspects, all of which strengthen the idea of cultural hegemony in texts. The first aspect is legitimacy, or the permissibility of reading. The meaning of the text must be acceptable within the social realm that it was composed. If the meaning was not possible in the time the text was written, it is not and cannot be the correct meaning of the text. Second, the text must meet the quality of correspondence, which means that all of the text must be included in the interpreted meaning. A reader cannot discard an element of the text; otherwise, the construed interpretation is incorrect. Generic appropriateness follows correspondence, and dictates that the text must adhere to all necessary technical conventions. Finally, and the most important aspect, is that of coherence. Coherence refers to how well the reader's conferred interpretation fits within the context. Hirsch defines context as the whole meaning of the text in addition to all of its partial meanings and the horizon of expectations and possibilities of meanings, all based on the author's typical outlook. If a textual interpretation does not fit within this horizon and all possibilities of meaning, it is likely a wrong interpretation of the text. Verifying a text's meaning according to Hirsch's theory of verification leads one to believe that, once again, cultural

hegemony is potentially promoted through text. According to Hirsch, an author's meaning is the only correct meaning and it must be verified according to contextual possibilities that were in existence during the time the author was writing. The likelihood that an author is influenced by a social, political, or economic norm during his composition of the text is high. Therefore, the text is potentially greatly impacted by these norms and may even propagate these norms.

A more modern theoretical perspective, post-colonialism, approaches texts through the idea that they are expressions of worldly power. Frantz Fanon asserts that texts are embedded in social networks and are always present in the surrounding world. Since they are firmly entrenched in the social realm, texts have social resonance and impact the environment and its people. As a result, scholarship is sometimes informed by racism. However, some writers who are angered by the racism and other norms that inform the world and its texts exorcise their anger and frustration by writing. In this perspective, both the act of writing through racism or rebelling against it allow for the continuance of cultural hegemony. If, as Fanon states, scholarship is informed by racism, and novel texts tend to be written by "scholars" who study cultures and areas for their character and plot development, racist notions along with other normative values may be implied in the text and possible transferred to the reader as he reads and interprets the text. Rebelling through written texts against the installation of racism and normative aspects of society in scholarship can sometimes remove the anger that causes an actual act of rebellion against a normative value. Consequently, the cathartic act of writing removes the possibility of rebellion, causing stagnation in society, where norms remain and change is prevented.

Edward Said focuses on examining the Oriental in comparison to the Western world, but his theories have heavy implications for hegemonic culture. Said theorizes that texts form a normative value through their portrayal of the "other." In discussing the Orient and the Western

world, what Said terms the “Occidental,” the relationship between the two, according to Said, is one of power and hegemony. The Orient is consistently conceived of as the “Other,” and it is conceived as such because of how Western nations define what they are and also what they are not. As a result, general ideas emerge about whom or what is an Oriental; this has continued into a detailed list of repressions, desires, investments, and projections. Said feels that the way in which the world views the Orient, among other “others,” helps to construe hegemony, because writers become more productive as a result of norms and their deviations. Said expressed this in his essay, “Orientalism,” stating, “the persistence and durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were productive, not unilaterally inhibiting” (2001).

Post-structuralist Jorge Habermas also provides an outlet for examining cultural hegemony within texts, for Habermas feels modernism revolts against norms and that which is normative. However, the revolution that occurs produces an obsession with profanity; modernists then attempt to run away from the results of this obsession, which creates only a deeper obsession with the profane. Rebellion, though, is caused by the false imposition of a normative value on the concept that is being reacted against. Similar to Fanon’s idea of angry writers, Habermas also feels that the false imposition of a normative value in order for rebellion to occur does not promote change; rather, it prevents change and promotes stagnation. The composition of novels is consistent with this idea. Those texts that attempt to react against a part of modern society instead create a notion that the part of society being reacted against is a normative value. Instead of the act of rebellion helping to overcome the ideology that is in place, it reinforces the ideology as the norm.

Habermas' theory is also similar to Michel Foucault's idea of power and hegemony. In writing about the development of sex and the view society has of sex, Foucault proposes that discussing the perversions of sex creates a new society. By establishing a discussion based on deviations from a sexual norm, an "other" is created, or a new social group. Those that adhere to the norm possess power, while those who deviate from the norm lose power or are unable to gain it. Foucault also theorizes that there is an inherent paradox in the creation of norms and deviations from those norms. By surfacing an ideology in hopes of repressing or altering it, more attention is actually given to that ideology. A recurring cycle is initiated and power is perpetuated as a result of calling attention to the correctness or incorrectness of a particular ideology.

While all of the previously mentioned theories provide support for the idea that through the examination of texts, cultural hegemony is sustained, perhaps the most relevant theory to finding cultural hegemony in novelistic texts is that of Marxism. Marxist theory reduces all aspects of society to material production and economics. An individual's thoughts are revolutionized by material production, and the social structure of a society evolves out of a collection of individual production. Anthony Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Frederic Jameson all approach the notions of texts through the means of production. Since economics and production are the foundation of any type of social structure, hegemony is perpetuated by the class system and levels of production, despite the Marxist notion that all are members of the same class. Marxist theorists believe that life determines consciousness. As individuals experience life, norms are created. These norms are then converted into codified writings, particularly in novels, thereby reinforcing hegemony, not rejecting it.

For Gramsci, there are two types of intellectuals—organic and traditional. While both types form intellectualism differently, they are both intellectuals and they create a homogeneity in society. Every social group has intellectuals, and in addition to intellectuals creating homogeneity in society, they also create social, economic, and political awareness. Intellectuals, however, are formed based on either education or status. The fact that intellectuals are generated by education and status produces a hierarchy. Intellectuals have a need to establish conditions that are most favorable to their class. But these conditions are going to maintain the social, economic, and political awareness that the intellectuals originally established. The texts intellectuals create assist in sustaining these ideals and, as a result, some classes of intellectuals remain interrupted by social and political change. An inert society results, thereby continuing the hegemonic culture. Gramsci proposes an option for those who wish to revolt, but says if new intellectuals want dominance, they must ideologically overcome the traditional intellectuals. This is a difficult task, and hegemony almost always continues to remain in place.

Althusser developed a model for analyzing ideologies in society. The model consists of an economic base, or infrastructure, and above it, the superstructure establishes the ideology. The superstructure is dialectical, but with respective indices of effectivity, which means that what occurs in the superstructure is determined by the economic base. Therefore, ideology is formed based upon economics, which are controlled by one social group. Apparatuses are employed by those in charge of the economic system to convince others of the ideology. Struggle may occur, but the economic base ensures that the ideology is perpetuated, because the struggle very rarely is able to overcome a traditional ideology. Thus, cultural hegemony continues.

Jameson, a Marxist philosopher, spoke about reading texts under a Marxist perspective. While Jameson felt economics and material production were the basis for society, he theorized that the reader interpreted texts based on the intervening culture and habits of interpretation. There is no separation of the text, reader, and the surrounding culture for Jameson. Two histories are important in interpreting a text for Jameson—the history of the object that is written about in the text and the history of the subject, or the history of “concepts and categories by which we understand those things” [objects] (1937). Jameson believed “interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a shot of interpretative options are either openly or implicitly in conflict” (1941). The histories of both object and subject lead a reader to make an interpretation of a text, but the interpretation must fit into both histories. Once an interpretation of a text is established, however, Jameson emphasizes that there is very little that can overcome that interpretation. Only a stronger interpretation can overthrow an initial interpretation. But the first interpretation is based on historical ideals and as such, is usually sustained in society by these ideals; a new interpretation would likely be interpreted as a deviation against these ideals and is unlikely to be accepted.

If one examines a novel according to these theories of power and hegemony as well as the notions of a text and its contributions to power and hegemony, it becomes clear that cultural hegemony is in fact perpetuated by texts. With novels, cultural hegemony becomes much more pervasive because of the form of the novel and its history. New Historicists Bordieu and Greenblatt agree with the idea that literature is a mirror. Bordieu argues that culture comes from the educational system, including preferences in literature. However, those who compose literature do not necessarily come from the social or educational class of the intended audience. This supports the composition of hegemonic texts, and the novel, which has an in depth plot

structure, is able to layer subtexts such that norms are subtly presented and may not be immediately discernable to the reader. Passivity is encouraged in the creation of novels and their buried subtexts, allowing for the nonverbal consent of individuals in perpetuating normative values. In addition, the working class has expectations of morality within a text and a relationship between art and life. If the daily lives of working class members are continually one immersed in hegemonic culture, they are going to seek out texts that will endeavor to relate to real-life culture and continue the hegemony of society.

According to Greenblatt, the lines between culture and texts are disintegrating; this causes culture to become more and more embedded in a text and for texts to reflect daily culture and its norms more often. Greenblatt writes, "Literature is conceived to mirror the period's beliefs, but to mirror them, as it were, from a safe distance" (2254). Novels are the perfect venue from which to do this. The developed plot structure can reflect the beliefs and norms of the times, but it can do so in a manner where a storyline conceals the underlying implication of the text.

As novels continue to persist in society, their objectives may change. But as they currently exist, novelistic texts tend to mediate the norms and deviations of those norms within a particular society and among social groups. Regardless of the size or basis of a society, the text of a novel is such that it perpetuates hegemony through its plot structure, character descriptions and themes. The everyday focus of novels relate situations to the masses, and the authors who are educated, many times in a way that their audience is not, allows them to concentrate their attention on convincing the masses or spreading propaganda in a subtle manner that will sustain a hegemonic culture, as long as the ideology within that culture is perpetuated. According to theories of literature, instead of creating change, novels prevent change, maintaining the status

quo of society where those who do not keep with normative values are labeled as the “other” and treated as such.

Works Cited

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