Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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FR Leavis's "The Great Tradition" (Session 2)

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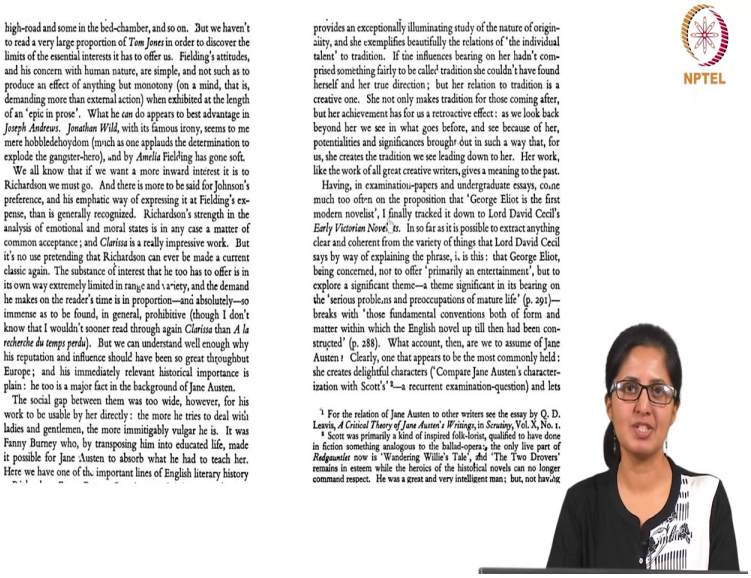
high-road and some in the bed-chamber, and so on. But we haven't to read a very large proportion of *Tom Jones* in order to discover the limits of the essential interests it has to offer us. Fielding's attitudes, and his concern with human nature, are simple, and not such as to produce an effect of anything but monotony (on a mind, that is, demanding more than external action) when exhibited at the length of an 'epic in prose'. What he *can* do appears to best advantage in *Joseph Andrews*. *Jonathan Wild*, with its famous irony, seems to me mere hobbledehoydom (much as one applauds the determination to explode the gangster-hero), and by *Amelia* Fielding has gone soft.

We all know that if we want a more inward interest it is to Richardson we must go. And there is more to be said for Johnson's preference, and his emphatic way of expressing it at Fielding's expense, than is generally recognized. Richardson's strength in the analysis of emotional and moral states is in any case a matter of common acceptance; and *Clarissa* is a really impressive work. But it's no use pretending that Richardson can ever be made a current classic again. The substance of interest that he too has to offer is in its own way extremely limited in range and variety, and the demand he makes on the reader's time is in proportion—and absolutely—so immense as to be found, in general, prohibitive (though I don't know that I wouldn't sooner read through again *Clarissa* than *A la recherche du temps perdu*). But we can understand well enough why his reputation and influence should have been so great throughout Europe; and his immediately relevant historical importance is plain: he too is a major fact in the background of Jane Austen.

The social gap between them was too wide, however, for his work to be usable by her directly: the more he tries to deal with ladies and gentlemen, the more immitigably vulgar he is. It was Fanny Burney who, by transposing him into educated life, made it possible for Jane Austen to absorb what he had to teach her. Here we have one of the important lines of English literary history

provides an exceptionally illuminating study of the nature of originality, and she exemplifies beautifully the relations of 'the individual talent' to tradition. If the influences bearing on her hadn't comprised something fairly to be called tradition she couldn't have found herself and her true direction; but her relation to tradition is a creative one. She not only makes tradition for those coming after, but her achievement has for us a retroactive effect: as we look back beyond her we see in what goes before, and see because of her, potentialities and significances brought out in such a way that, for us, she creates the tradition we see leading down to her. Her work, like the work of all great creative writers, gives a meaning to the past.

Having, in examination-papers and undergraduate essays, come much too often on the proposition that 'George Eliot is the first modern novelist', I finally tracked it down to Lord David Cecil's *Early Victorian Novelists*. In so far as it is possible to extract anything clear and coherent from the variety of things that Lord David Cecil says by way of explaining the phrase, i. is this: that George Eliot, being concerned, not to offer 'primarily an entertainment', but to explore a significant theme—a theme significant in its bearing on the 'serious problems and preoccupations of mature life' (p. 291)—breaks with 'those fundamental conventions both of form and matter within which the English novel up till then had been constructed' (p. 288). What account, then, are we to assume of Jane Austen? Clearly, one that appears to be the most commonly held: she creates delightful characters ('Compare Jane Austen's characterization with Scott's'[2]—a recurrent examination-question) and lets

[1] For the relation of Jane Austen to other writers see the essay by Q. D. Leavis, *A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings*, in *Scrutiny*, Vol. X, No. 1.
[2] Scott was primarily a kind of inspired folk-lorist, qualified to have done in fiction something analogous to the ballad-opera, the only live part of *Redgauntlet* now is 'Wandering Willie's Tale', and 'The Two Drovers' remains in esteem while the heroics of the historical novels can no longer command respect. He was a great and very intelligent man; but, not having

Hello and welcome to yet another session of this course on literary criticism. We are looking at FR Leavis' work *The Great Tradition* which became very fundamental in laying the foundations of modern literary criticism, and also for professionalizing literary study in multiple ways, that was something that he had been doing from the 1930s onwards. We find the continuing influence of Eliot's idea of the tradition in his notion of literary tradition as well. And we had been looking at how he had primarily focused on just a hand full of select English novelists to talk about the great literary tradition that novel has. And while talking about Jane Austen which is what we shall be looking at in this current lecture, he talks about her relationship with tradition as a created one.

We find that just like Eliott did in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent,* here also Leavis is taking a very interesting look at the idea of the tradition. It is not in the traditional sense that he wants to look at tradition, but as something which is in continuity, which is in flux, something which has the power to encompass the past and the present, in that sense, while he is taking about the relation that Jane Austen has with tradition.

This is what he says: “She not only makes tradition for those coming after, but her achievement has for us a retroactive effect: as we look back beyond her we see in what goes before, and see because of her potentialities and significances brought out in such a way that, for us, she creates the tradition we see leading down to her.” So, we find a certain sense of continuity, and also about the way in which the past and the present and the future ahead, merges in a certain kind of a historical streamline.

“Her work, like the work of all great creative writers, gives a meaning to the past.” So, when we are looking at the oeuvre of Jane Austen, it is just not about her own work, her body of work gives meaning, gives potentialities, gives a trajectory, gives a positioning to the writers who went before her. Like Leavis was trying to establish in the previous passage as well, all the other great fiction writers, the pioneers, who went before her, their stature, their positioning and their significance becomes more accentuated when we look at how Jane Austen has used this tradition to her advantage. Jane Austen here is being seen as someone who gives meaning to the past writers.

Jane Austen's work becomes significant not just for the present era, not just in setting a standard for the future, but also for us to make sense of the kind of writings, and the kind of work that went before her. This continuity, this historical sense that Leavis gives to tradition, the understanding of tradition is something that we find him taking from Eliot's time onwards, and that is also extremely important in our understanding of canon formation, and our understanding of the ways in which particular writers are positioned, and their significance getting accentuated at various points of time.

As mentioned before, Leavis had worked extensively towards the professionalization of literary studies. As part of that, we find this 1948 work contributing much towards the canon-making process, towards solidifying many things in terms of curriculum, in terms of university teaching. We do find him using some of the text, and using certain kinds of frameworks, which would be useful for framing the ways in which this discipline has been emerging as well. This is what he says at the opening of the next paragraph: “Having, in examination-papers and undergraduate essays, come much too often on the proposition that ‘George Eliot is the first modern novelist’,

I finally tracked it down to Lord David Cecil's *Early Victorian Novelists*." We find him trying to reassess the cannon, we find him trying to engage with history, engage with the canon-making process, and also reassessing the works based on the framework that he is proposing. "In so far as it is possible to extract anything clear and coherent from the variety of things that Lord David Cecil says by way of explaining the phrase, it is this: that George Eliot, being concerned, not to offer 'primarily an entertainment', but to explore a significant theme, a theme significant in its bearing on 'the serious problems and preoccupation of mature life'—breaks with 'those fundamental conventions both of form and matter within which the English novel up till then had been constructed.'" Based on that, he is asking, "What account, then, are we to assume of Jane Austen? Clearly, one that appears to be the most commonly held: she creates delightful characters."

Now, after having told us extensively how he would like to position Jane Austen, and how she is very conveniently positioned in such a way that her presence, her body of work, gives a sense to the past, he now goes on to the examine Jane Austen's works in detail. First of all, he agrees with other critics who have mentioned the same thing: that she creates delightful characters.

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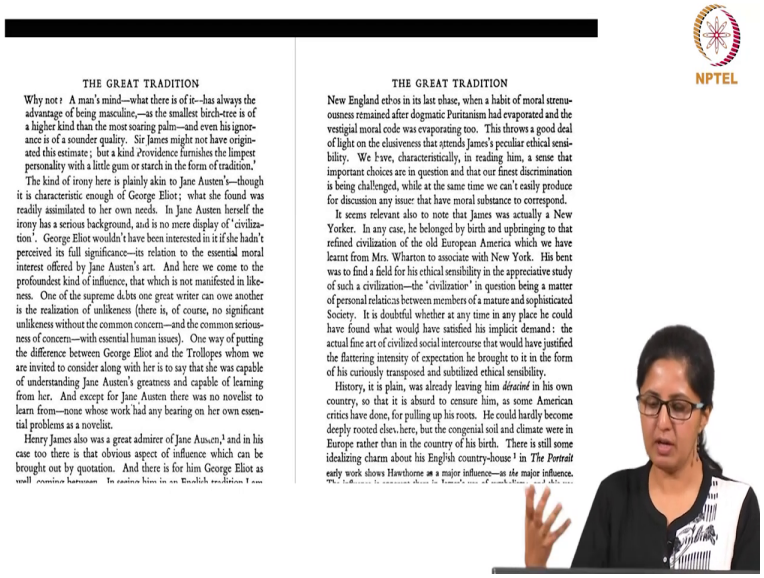

"Compare Jane Austen's characterization with Scott's—a recurrent examination question." He is also making his discussion in alignment with the discussions within the classroom, as far as this discipline of English literature is concerned. And then, having said that, he also dwells at length

on some of the comparisons that Cecil also makes, in terms of the comparisons between George Elliot and Jane Austen. And he also quotes some passages on which we will not be spending much time.

Then he moves on to say that Jane Austen's plots and her novels in general, "were put together 'very deliberately and calculatedly' (if not 'like a building'). But her interest in 'composition' is not something to be put over against her interest in life: nor does she offer an 'aesthetic' value that is separable from moral significance." Here we come to the most important point that Leavis is about to highlight about the moral preoccupation that he thinks Jane Austen had. And that, according to Leavis, elevates Jane Austen above all the other writers, and this is how he goes on to talk about her craft.

"The principle of organization, and the principle of development, in her work, is an intense moral interest of her own in life that is in the first place a preoccupation with certain problems that life compels on her as personal ones. She is intelligent and serious enough to be able to impersonalize her moral tensions as she strives, in her art, to become more fully conscious of them, and to learn what, in the interests of life, she ought to do with them. Without her intense moral preoccupation, she would not have been a great novelist."

He is here underscoring what he thinks is the greatest contribution, the greatest quality that made Jane Austen a great novelist—her intense moral preoccupation. And this is something that Leavis continuous to emphasize on throughout this discussion of the great tradition. "This account of her would, if I had cared to use the formula, have been my case for calling Jane Austen, and not anyone later, 'the first modern novelist'."

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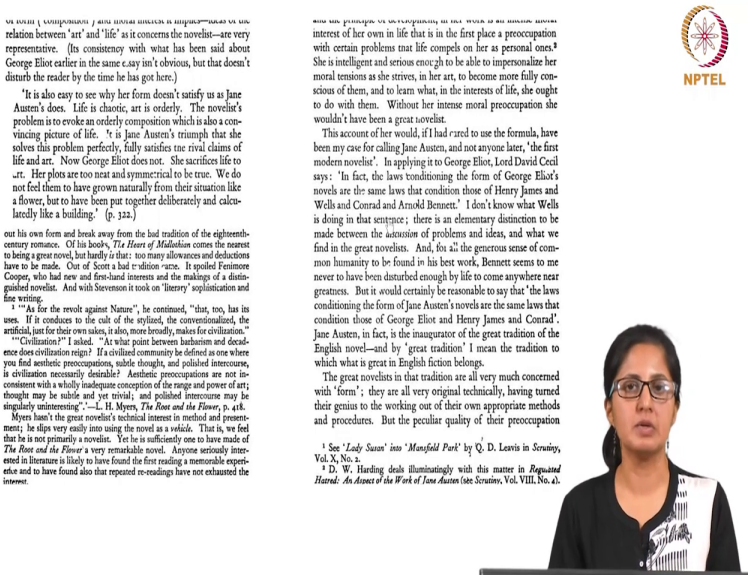
relation between 'art' and 'life' as it concerns the novelist—are very representative. (Its consistency with what has been said about George Eliot earlier in the same essay isn't obvious, but that doesn't disturb the reader by the time he has got here.)

'It is also easy to see why her form doesn't satisfy us as Jane Austen's does. Life is chaotic, art is orderly. The novelist's problem is to evoke an orderly composition which is also a convincing picture of life. It is Jane Austen's triumph that she solves this problem perfectly, fully satisfies the rival claims of life and art. Now George Eliot does not. She sacrifices life to art. Her plots are too neat and symmetrical to be true. We do not feel them to have grown naturally from their situation like a flower, but to have been put together deliberately and calculatedly like a building.' (p. 322.)

out his own form and break away from the bad tradition of the eighteenth-century romance. Of his books, *The Heart of Midlothian* comes the nearest to being a great novel, but hardly *is* that: too many allowances and deductions have to be made. Out of Scott a bad tradition came. It spoiled Fenimore Cooper, who had new and first-hand interests and the makings of a distinguished novelist. And with Stevenson it took on 'literary' sophistication and fine writing.

[1] "As for the revolt against Nature", he continued, "that, too, has its uses. If it conduces to the cult of the stylized, the conventionalized, the artificial, just for their own sakes, it also, more broadly, makes for civilization."

"'Civilization?" I asked. "At what point between barbarism and decadence does civilization reign? If a civilized community be defined as one where you find aesthetic preoccupations, subtle thought, and polished intercourse, is civilization necessarily desirable? Aesthetic preoccupations are not inconsistent with a wholly inadequate conception of the range and power of art; thought may be subtle and yet trivial; and polished intercourse may be singularly uninteresting".'—L. H. Myers, *The Root and the Flower*, p. 418.

Myers hasn't the great novelist's technical interest in method and presentment; he slips very easily into using the novel as a *vehicle*. That is, we feel that he is not primarily a novelist. Yet he is sufficiently one to have made of *The Root and the Flower* a very remarkable novel. Anyone seriously interested in literature is likely to have found the first reading a memorable experience and to have found also that repeated re-readings have not exhausted the interest.

interest of her own in life that is in the first place a preoccupation with certain problems that life compels on her as personal ones.[2] She is intelligent and serious enough to be able to impersonalize her moral tensions as she strives, in her art, to become more fully conscious of them, and to learn what, in the interests of life, she ought to do with them. Without her intense moral preoccupation she wouldn't have been a great novelist.

This account of her would, if I had cared to use the formula, have been my case for calling Jane Austen, and not anyone later, 'the first modern novelist'. In applying it to George Eliot, Lord David Cecil says: 'In fact, the laws conditioning the form of George Eliot's novels are the same laws that condition those of Henry James and Wells and Conrad and Arnold Bennett.' I don't know what Wells is doing in that sentence; there is an elementary distinction to be made between the *discussion* of problems and ideas, and what we find in the great novelists. And, for all the generous sense of common humanity to be found in his best work, Bennett seems to me never to have been disturbed enough by life to come anywhere near greatness. But it would certainly be reasonable to say that 'the laws conditioning the form of Jane Austen's novels are the same laws that condition those of George Eliot and Henry James and Conrad'. Jane Austen, in fact, is the inaugurator of the great tradition of the English novel—and by 'great tradition' I mean the tradition to which what is great in English fiction belongs.

The great novelists in that tradition are all very much concerned with 'form'; they are all very original technically, having turned their genius to the working out of their own appropriate methods and procedures. But the peculiar quality of their preoccupation

[1] See '*Lady Susan*' *into* '*Mansfield Park*' by Q. D. Leavis in *Scrutiny*, Vol. X, No. 2.
[2] D. W. Harding deals illuminatingly with this matter in *Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen* (see *Scrutiny*, Vol. VIII. No. 4).

So, he is departing her from one of the point that Cecil made where he calls George Elliot as a first modern novelist and here Leavis begs different and he says according to him the first modern novelist would be Jane Austen and in applying it to George Elliot he finds it very problematic that Cecil applied to George Elliot and by the end of this paragraph he almost concludes and categorically states Jane Austen, in fact, is the inaugurator of the great tradition of the English novel and by great tradition. I mean the tradition to which what is great in English fiction belongs.

So, here this is a 1948 work and novel still a young genre but as we discussed in the early outset of this essay Leavis finds it very imperative to take stock of the work and also to pronounce some greatness to this young genre which had been seen as something without the baggage tradition, here he is trying to establish.

He is trying to construct a tradition into which the other novelist could be included. Now, he is discussing about the integral part of fiction form. The great novelists in that tradition are all very much concerned with form they are all very original technically having turned their genius to the working out of their own appropriate methods and procedures.

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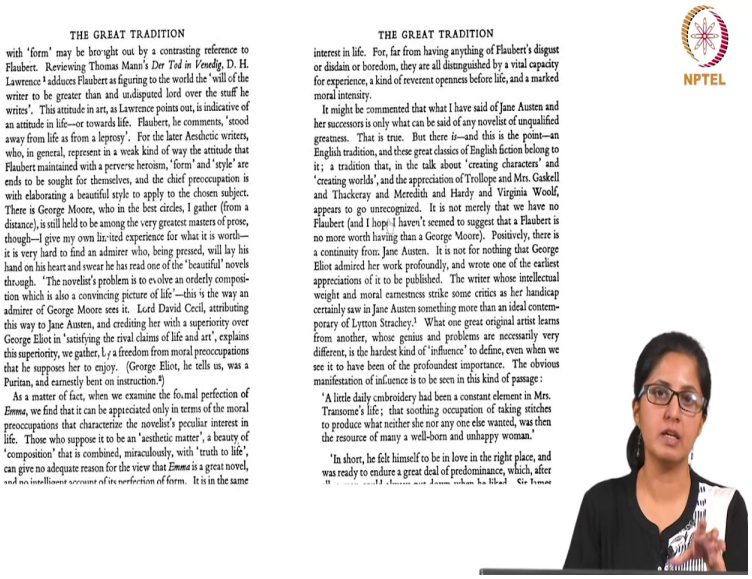

But the peculiar quality of their preoccupation with form maybe brought out by a contrasting reference to Flaubert. So, form becomes extremely important here when Leavis is discussing and even over here there is a superiority that he is able to attribute to Jane Austen as we see towards the end of this paragraph.

The novelist's problem is to evolve an orderly composition which is also a convincing picture of life this is a way an admirer of George Moore sees it. Lord David Cecil attributing this way to Jane Austen and crediting her with a superiority over George Elliot in satisfying the rival claims of life and art explains the superiority we gathered by a freedom from moral preoccupations that he supposes her to enjoy.

So, there is a certain fine balance also which is being brought over here, there is a intense nor preoccupation because of which he Leavis argues that Jane Austen is best fit to inaugurate this tradition and she is considered as a great novelist and she is considered as the, as someone who has set this tradition in place but there is also a certain superiority of form that is being attributed to her. And he goes on to talk about the formal perfection of Emma and about the aesthetic matter a beauty of composition that is combined miraculously with truth to life.

So, there is aesthetics and life coming together and if you recall the definition that Henry James also attributed to fiction it is something which is competing with life fiction, something which is forever competing with life there is a way in which fiction tries to overtakes life, stimulates life,

imitate life and there is a very strong competition in real life. So, having said that truth to life and this perfection of form both become extremely important in Leavis framework as well.

And now, Leavis is also conscious about a certain flipped side of this (genre) friction. It might be commented that what I have said of Jane Austen and her successors is only what can be said of any novelist of unqualified greatness. Truth of life or perfection in form or this preoccupation of moral intensity this could be very loosely identified and attributed to any novelist perhaps. So, what is it about Jane Austen and this great tradition that he identifies what is very significantly different about them but there is and this is the point an English tradition.

So, this is extremely important look at the way he has italicized, so there is and this is a point an English tradition, and these great classics of English fiction belongs to it. A tradition that in the talk about creating characters and creating worlds and the appreciation of Trollope and Misses Gaskell and Thackeray and Meredith and Hardy and Virginia Woolf appears to go on unrecognized.

So, we find this trajectory fully forming, fully developing over here, there is an English tradition then this assertion this is very very important, this is very very important to further the ambitions in terms of the literary tradition this is very very important in order to separate a particular kind of an English tradition as far as novel is concerned and from being a genre without any baggage of of tradition he is here able to nativize this tradition Leavis is able to provide a very nativist kind of tradition to the emergence of novel an English tradition could be identified regardless of the other important writers who existed in different languages and different cultures and what Leavis here is concerned is about this tradition.

This sentence it is a very categorical statement it is not ambivalent it is very very assertive in its quality. But there is and that is this is a point an English tradition and these great classics of English fiction belong to it. And there is no debate this is not an open-ended thing that he proposes before us. The presence of an English tradition or something that he is able to assert, that he is able to position here beyond any kind of debate and the annealing politics of this and the many biases which are inherent in this that something that we should take a look at after we have gone through the first chapter.

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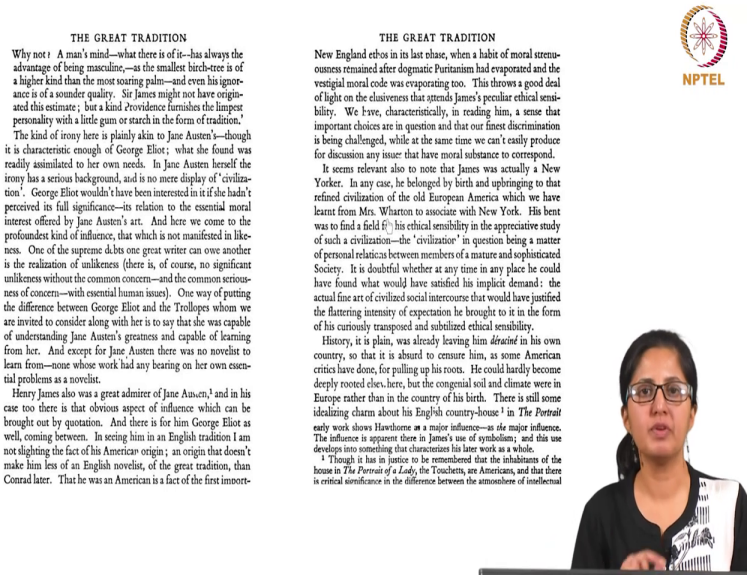

Again, while talking about the greatness of George Elliot. We find the way in which that is again connected to Jane Austen, look at this one way of putting the difference between George Elliot and the Trollopes whom we are invited to consider along with her is to say that she was capable of understanding Jane Austen's greatness and capable of learning from her.

So, this is another significant thing about tradition one great writer is able to recognize the greatness in another writer. One great work is able to imitate or follow or set way itself in the greatness of other. And in that continuity he also states and expect for Jane Austen there was no novelist to learn from none whose work had any bearing on her own essential problems as a novelist.

This is very very important and in George Elliot's identification of Jane Austen as a only novelist from home anything could be learnt this effective tradition further accentuated and here Leavis is also not loving certain other kinds of dialogues to exist over here there is not inherent greatness that is being attributed to Jane Austen for her essential moral preoccupation for the perfection of form for one for characters that she created and for her ability to imbibe from the past and also, more importantly, her ability to stand as an imitable figure her ability to stand as this pillar of tradition which the others can imitate which the others can amulet and take off from.

So, Jane Austen here becomes not just the first great novelist but also someone on whom this entire foundation dress not just her appearing, but the past, the present, and the future. Henry

James, he says, also was a great admirer of Jane Austen and his case too there is that obvious aspect of influence which can be brought out by quotation and there is for him George Elliot as welcoming between.

In seeing him in an English tradition I am not slighting the fact of his American origin an origin that does not make him less of an English novelist of the great tradition than the Conrad later. That he was an American is a fact of the first importance of the critic and as mister, Yvor Winters brings out admirably in his book Maule curse.

Mister Winters discusses him as a product of the New England Ethos in its last phase when a habit of strenuousness remained after dogmatic puritanism has evaporated and the vestigial moral code was evaporating too. This throws a good deal of light on the illusiveness that attends James's peculiar ethical sensibility. I want you to see the politics over here the very evident imperialist politics which is also talking about the nation about nationalism whether the way it attributes and we find literature in spite of its humanist tradition in spite of this aspirating look that it seems to advocate there also a certain way in which ownership is being taken in terms of nationality in terms of ethnicity.

And, the base in which this dialogue is being able to, this dialogue is being promoted over here and two writers are being discussed over here writers of English origin, writers of American origin and there is a way in which the American writer the American critic has also been appropriated into English tradition.

And this is what I want you to see in terms of the idea of the tradition that Leavis is trying to foreground and you may also here very conveniently recall that even Elliott was of American origin and there is a way in which some kind of appropriation takes place when it comes to the framing of tradition and we find that finally at work over here as when Leavis is trying to establish an English tradition when he says there is an English tradition and that is something which is not open for any kind of a debate and based on that assumption he moves forward with the other kinds of discussions as well.

And here it is also amazing the way in which within the context of literature many of these things are coming together it is not just about aesthetic it is also about the politics, it is also about the

politics of the identity and we find all of this coming together in this discussion of canon formation that Leavis undertakes in his work the great tradition.

So, with this, we wrap up today and then we will continue discussing this text and we should also look at the implications of this work in forging this great tradition and implications of this work not just in terms of understanding the tradition of English fiction but also how this provided larger frameworks, how it provided ample methodology for other cannon formations for other processes of canon formation to take off from twentieth century onwards. So, with this we wrap up the discussion over here and I look forward to seeing you in the next session. Thank you for your time and attention.