

LITERATURE AS A SOCIAL MIRROR AND A CULTURAL TOOL FOR PROTEST

ABSTRACT

In a letter to Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels confessed that he learned more from Honoré de Balzac about the French society than from all the books of all the historians, economists and statisticians of the time put together. Literary art has always presented itself as a social mirror, exposing the reflection of the society in which the writer was inserted, but to what actual extent can Literature reveal and interpret human behavior and society? To what extent can it expose, condemn, and be the engine of its transformation?

As Bakhtin's conception argues, the social function of literature as a space for critical reflection, makes, particularly the works that bring the tendency of realistic theory, raise the analysis and weighting of the subject in relation to the society in which they are inserted. This, alongside with the obvious fact that literature is part of the culture of a given society and, therefore, it reveals social patterns that have been considered relevant, and which will help to decipher its mutations, progress and ways of manifesting culture, reveals the value of Literature as an instrument of the social sciences since it allows us to understand what the primary factors of a society are and how they affect it.

In this paper I will explain in more detail how literature does then reflect the environment the author lives in and, therefore, its society, to the point where you can identify political, social, economic and several other factors, and use it as a tool to expose and protest many injustices, both if narrating the present or the past, as it is never too late to give a voice to the wronged.

Keywords: Literature; Cultural Transformation; Protest Art; Social Sciences.

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Não escrevi a história que esperava, a que de lá trouxe é esta.

Machado de Assis

The word is always charged with a meaning or an ideological or experiential sense.

*This is how we understand words and why we only react to those that awaken
ideological or life-related resonances in us.*

Mikhail Bakhtin

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In the unfolding of History, the several currents of thought were deeply based on the tendency to consider literature as a bearer and reflective instance of society. Thus, literary production appeared as a faithful and immediate mirror, directly subordinated by the social order. Whether by defending literature as a school of civism or by considering it an instrument of political awareness, the idea always ended up focusing on the same point: the literature-society dichotomy for the didactic-pedagogical relationship. This conception of literature is, at the very least, reductive because it portrays the literary work as a mere testimony of society, as a document intended exclusively for the recording of events. In this way, an essential dimension of thinking society is lost: that of a society which is both an objective and subjective reality.

On the other hand, while it is undeniable that literary production is an expression of society and a social phenomenon, it is also evident that it does not do so in a literal way, but instead modifies and even denies it (OLIVEIRA, 1984). If literature emerges from a certain historical reality, this does not imply that it is a rigorous and exact record of it. On the contrary, the Letters tend to rebel, providing a representation in which society refuses to recognize itself. It is therefore a necessary, contradictory, and unpredictable relationship (PAZ, 1983).

According to the critic António Candido, "[...] literature can be a conscious instrument of unmasking, because it focuses on situations of restriction of rights, or denial of them, such as misery, servitude, spiritual mutilation". (2004). The tradition of literature as a denouncer of injustices in society has been established for a very long time, but for a text to be effective, it is not sufficient for it simply to describe marginalization, violence, and misery. For it to be able to act as a true instrument of effective denunciation and

reveal its transforming capacities, the aesthetic element is fundamental. (CANDIDO, 2004) Literature, like all kinds of art, can be used to expose and fight against many situations of injustice through a faithful and immediate mirror, of course, but also through a subjective, poetic, playful, endless-amount-of-adjectives wordplay.

On the authority of John Stauffer, a writer and Harvard professor, there exist a set of rules that helps categorize what he understands by protest literature: empathy, shock value, and symbolic action, in which empathy encourages, shock value inspires emotions and desires, and symbolic action promotes interpretation. Stauffer describes literature as a mirror, a guide and a catalyst of social transformation, since he believes it to be the motor of change by allowing a collective consciousness, which helps people realize they might share a dissatisfaction about certain topics within society.

For Antoine Compagnon, a French writer and literature professor, as for myself literature is opposition, as it has the ability to contest the submission of power. And that is why, not rarely, humanity has seen books being burned in public squares, Arts and Humanities faculties closed, and cultural activities banned by political police forces and their dictators, as well as persecuted, imprisoned, and killed authors. All that because literature has the wonderful power to challenge the absolute truths and today, as always, it endows man with a perception that leads him to resist the restrictions imposed to and by society. This role of literature, deeply rooted in the Enlightenment conceptions of the 18th century, makes literature an instrument of justice, tolerance, and protest - characteristics that contribute to a certain liberation of man from the dogmas imposed on his surroundings. Literature more than a form of knowledge and learning can and should be a form of encouraging and nurturing critical thinking of the *status quo* of a given culture and society.

All in all, literature connects all human beings and mirrors reality in an artistic way promoting critical thinking among its citizens. As long as our world lives, so does literature flourish. (LORENZO, 2014) It is also important to mention that the timeless works of some literary masters, enrich and extend our understanding by providing us with insight into human nature and about the consequences of human action. It brings to us other perspectives and allows us to see the world through other's eyes. This will produce the broadening of our understanding of the definition of human nature and of its condition, even if we haven't lived the tragedies, difficulties and pain ourselves. We experience and learn through the experiences represented in literary works which helps us develop not only as a society but also within ourselves. One may even say that the first is not possible

without the second and vice versa. In the words of Marcel Proust, “only through literary art can we escape from ourselves and know the perspective of another on the world.”

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