Sociological Analysis

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

—Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina

As its name implies, sociological analysis is concerned with the way social groups operate. If the psychological is an investigation of the individual, the sociological focuses on groups, clarifying how segments and elements struggle against each other for power or validation.

In much of his work, French intellectual Michel Foucault argued that all relationships are power relationships, whether between king and servant, employer and employee, husband and wife, lover and lover, father and daughter, teacher and student, neighbor and neighbor, friend and friend. Relationships are interactive, and the persons involved set up hierarchies depending on how each perceives the other and what that other brings to the relationship. Foucault notes that the power within a relationship is not necessarily exploitative; rather, power is the understanding participants have as they determine—often unconsciously—where areas of strength and weakness lie, and how each participant is to act with the other. The aim of sociological analysis is to explicate the nature of the power inherent in all relationships.

Whereas psychological analysis attempts to understand characters and their behaviors, sociological analysis targets groups of characters, isolating the conflicts and inadequacies in the arrangement and between individuals within and without those groups. In Classical literature, society comprised those at the top of the power ladder, so that writers examined only that segment of culture with the most influence over others. Aristotle in his Poetics argued for this orientation when he insisted tragedy focus on persons in high places. Over two millennia later, Arthur Miller shifted the focus down the sociological ladder when he created Willy Loman, the last name indicating Miller’s challenge of Aristotle’s definition.

In the last century, cultural critics have come to view society not as a single culture, but as an interaction of cultures: society is less a specific group than a dialogue among groups. This dialogue produces culture, so that an analysis of culture requires an understanding of the groups (i.e., the specifics) that make it up. In this way we might examine Hamlet not just as a set of intrigues in the court of Elsinore, but also as an example of women’s role in a patriarchal culture (Ophelia and Gertrude), the countervailing world of the commoner (the clowns/gravediggers), the dynamics of family relationships (father-son foils), the sexual behaviors between parent and child (Hamlet and Gertrude), or the uses of class as a power ploy (the killing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; the crowd’s support of Laertes).
By the close of the nineteenth century, sociological analysis found more fodder to feed on. Whereas the satires of eighteenth century England focused on the aristocracy, industrialization encouraged the rise of realistic and naturalistic writing, moving the focus of discussion further down the social scale. In such a world view, the fate of Stephen Crane’s Maggie is more than a study of a fallen woman; it is an indictment of the social setting that deprives her of choices. When John Dos Passos composed his pastiche pieces, from *Manhattan Transfer* to *The USA Trilogy*, he broadened the discussion of society to include the disenfranchised. Similarly, sociological approaches to subject matter allowed the examination of gradations within the upper class (the writing of Edith Wharton, Henry James, E.M. Forster, and Virginia Woolf) and critiques of social forces that created an underclass (John Steinbeck, Bernard Malamud, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, John Osborne, and Toni Morrison).

In the twenty-first century, new studies in gender and political history encouraged the founding of feminist and Marxist approaches to literature. Where previous sociological analyses of the works of Charles Dickens focused on his satirizing of English manners and customs, more recent studies have examined his predilection for waiflike female characters and their role within patriarchal culture, while other critics have noted Dickens’s critique of class in such novels as *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*. A sociological approach isolates the forces that create conditions under which the characters operate, as opposed to focusing on the characters themselves, as well as the power structures that direct and influence individual and group behavior.

Ultimately, increasing globalization encouraged sociological examinations of conflicting national cultures, as in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Alan Paton’s *Cry, The Beloved Country*, and Julia Alvarez’s *Yo!. Traditionnally, social groups have been viewed as those in power, so that European, patriarchal societies have dominated cultural discussions. But the urbanization and industrialization of the nineteenth century increased awareness of groups that, though removed from centers of power, nevertheless interacted with and affected other cultures. As twentieth century notions of cultural identity were redefined, culture itself underwent revision. Sociologists began to recognize a variety of sub-cultures based on gender, economics, education, religion, work, geography, ethnicity, nationality, social trends, and customs.

Nor need cultures be defined by size. The friends we associate with, the colleagues we work with, comprise our most intimate cultures; the most influential culture we operate within are our own families. The discussion of family dynamics has also shifted from the aristocracy to the middle and lower classes, from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* to Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, Anne Tyler’s *The Sun Also Rises*, and Asian-American Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*. In our roles as father, mother, daughter, son, we operate within social conventions and familial...