

***Border Country* by Raymond Williams: Attempting to Articulate the “Structure of Feeling”**

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Abstract This article demonstrates the “structure of feeling,” Raymond Williams’ much-debated concept as it appears in his autobiographical novel, *Border Country* (1960). By drawing upon the nuances of Williams’ cultural theory, it is the purpose of this article to trace his attempt to articulate diverse dimensions of the “structure of feeling” in this novel. Furthermore, this article touches upon Williams’ various epochal classifications of culture such as dominant, residual, emergent and pre-emergent cultural elements as well as the ramifications of the communal and individual realities of England and Wales within the two time frames of the 1920s and the 1950s. Consequently, this article illustrates the manner in which Williams cultivates his artistic talent to embrace both subjective and collective experiences to capture the multi-faceted generational emotional energies depicted in *Border Country*.

Keywords Raymond Williams, structure of feeling, *Border Country*, cultural theory

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Introduction

Border Country (1960) is an autobiographical novel that traces Welsh history over the span of two generations. Throughout the pastiche-like structure of this novel, Williams employs non-chronological plotting, shifting backwards and forwards

in time in an attempt to weave together the two parts of his identity: his Welsh heritage and his London life. The duality of Williams' character is paralleled by the split in the character of the protagonist into Matthew Price of London and Will of Glynmawr. The novel covers a variety of themes and notions, most noticeably "the structure of feeling," Williams' widely debatable concept, specifically in relation to the struggle of the working class during the General Strike of 1926. Moreover, *Border Country* delves into other issues which include the contrasting characteristics of life in Wales and England, the spread of socialism and the implications of the Industrial Revolution in culture and society. This article explores how Williams utilizes his artistic creation to encompass both personal and social experiences as well as individual and collective meanings and values, and how a combination of all these varying elements manifest themselves in the structure of feeling.

Williams' "Structure of Feeling"

Williams' "structure of feeling" is an all-encompassing, yet highly fluid concept which has come under close scrutiny by critics in a multitude of disciplines and theoretical frameworks, ranging from cultural studies, psychoanalysis, political analyses, communication studies, and more recently, studies in mindfulness and affect theory. This ever-evolving force expands across various ages and spaces, both capturing the lived experiences of the moment and anticipating the changes and variations of collective and individual emotional energies to come.

In the *Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, Jenny Bourne Taylor gives a definition of Williams' "Structure of feeling":

Williams first used this concept to characterize the lived experience of the quality of life at a particular time and place. It is, he argued, "as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible part of our activities." Later he describes structures of feeling as "social experiences in solution." Thus a "structure of feeling" is the culture of a particular historical moment, though in developing the concept, Williams wished to avoid idealist notions of a "spirit of the age." It suggests a common set of perceptions and values shared by a particular generation, and is most clearly articulated in particular and artistic forms and conventions. Each generation lives and produces its own "structure of feeling," and while particular groups might express this most forcibly, it extends unevenly through the culture as a whole. (670)

According to Sean Matthews, “the structure of feeling” takes a peculiar place in Williams’ thought, both illustrating and mediating Williams’ attempt to put forth his own and his age’s distinctive priorities. As this structure of feeling surfaces, it is accompanied by the discrepancies and challenges that are characteristic of the 1950s, both of which become the focus of this concept. Just like the “interdependence of Matthew Price’s life and work, the term seems precisely, directly generated from and representative of Williams’ own crises and experience.” Therefore, the phrase indicates “the very pressures it is devised to define, and tracing its articulation both illustrates and enables analysis of the more general emergence of new priorities” (190).

In a historical survey of Williams’s concept, Stuart Middleton explains that “‘the structure of feeling’ has frequently served to connect subjectivity to broader social and material processes” (1). Middleton adds that this concept has proven quite valuable for “scholars following the more recent ‘affective turn’ in the humanities either as an analytical tool in its own right or as a pioneering step towards the development of a now densely constructed theoretical framework” (1). The term “affect” as defined in *The Affect Theory Reader* as “an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of the passage) of forces or intensities” (Seigworth and Gregg qtd. In Hogan 2) shares numerous features with Williams’ “structure of feeling.” In fact, affect theorists view art and more specifically literature as a highly developed form of “simulation – a fundamental, evolved operation of the human mind” (Hogan 2). In that regard, art for Williams presents the space wherein the interplay between subjectivity and cultural impressions may be most noticeably articulated. As such, the communication of ‘the structure of feeling’ within the realm of art best serves affective theory critics to expound upon the far-reaching vicinities of the emotional realities across generations.

Rebecca Coleman connects Williams’ “structure of feeling” to mindfulness or “the cultivation of ways to become attentive in and to the present moment” (1). More specifically Coleman views “the affective relations between neo-liberalism and mindfulness as a series of relays, modulations or recalibrations in and between individual bodies and wider collective moods or atmospheres or ‘structures of feelings’” (1). This correlation between ‘the structure of feeling’ on the one hand and mindfulness and affect theory studies on the other further exemplifies the multifaceted flux attributes of Williams’ concept. It represents a site for conflict wherein individual and communal energies come together then dissipate into a myriad of directions only to realign into new manners and dispositions at the

subjective and collective levels of experience.

For Vicki Mayer, Williams' concept has recently resurfaced in cultural studies and that "the waxing popularity" of this 1950s term is in large part due to "the growth of affect theory as a way to challenge hegemonic cultural claims" (2). In the years 2015-2020 Mayer actually employs Williams' "structure of feeling" as a tool to analyze the "dual structures of feeling surrounding the development of a Google data center in the Groningen region," a remote village in the Netherlands. Of particular significance to Mayer is Williams' exploration of "felt aspects of lived experience" with regard to the relations and conflicts surrounding the countryside and the city in his two seminal essays "Culture in Ordinary" and "Between Country and the City." In the latter essay he describes "the complicated situation of urbanites who relocated to his home village, not to dominate the prior structure of feeling, but to contribute through the revitalization of public life" (3). For Williams one cannot simply classify experiences as belonging to the country or the city; rather, to fully comprehend the various urban and rural structures of feelings, it becomes essential to consider positions that are "between and across changing versions of both [country and city]" (Williams "Culture is Ordinary" 229, qtd. In Mayer 3).

These multidimensional aspects surrounding the country / city dichotomy are captured by Williams in his autobiographical novel *Border Country* in which he attempts to articulate the varying structures of feeling that extend from his home village in Wales to his newly acquired home in London.

The Structure of Feeling in *Border Country*

In *Border Country* Williams endeavors to personally demonstrate the artist's ability to encapsulate "the structure of feeling," given the assumption that the artist is best equipped to sense and express emotional forces surrounding a generation. Sean Matthews draws a direct parallel between the duality of experience in the lives of both Williams and Matthew Price. Matthew Price's population studies represent his attempt to comprehend a whole socio-historical movement, namely the industrial revolution on the one hand, and his own private experience on the other. As Morgan Rosser points out to Matthew, his academic project is really about "what change does to people, change from the outside, the big movements. You're asking about him [Matthew's father] and yourself" (Williams, *Border* 286). Likewise, Williams' written works in the 1950s illustrate his attempt to come to terms with "changes that are of historical significance, but also of both private and he argues, representative,

contemporary concerns” (Matthews 180).

The experience of change for Williams was a combination of the personal and the public. As he explains in a 1960 published interview with Richard Hoggart,

Getting the tradition right was getting myself right, and that meant changing both myself and the usual version of tradition...moving out of a working class home into an academic curriculum, absorbing it first, and then later trying to get the two experiences into relation. (Williams and Hoggart, qtd. in Matthews 180)

According to Laura De Michele, the Matthew / Will twofold experience along with Williams’ own memories and the structure of feeling in that particular point in history all serve in the endeavor to create “a new way of seeing, and also, a new way of writing” (23). The rejuvenation of the writing experience is an attempt to articulate a new structure of feeling. As Williams himself declares in *The Long Revolution*, “the new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up continuities...yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling” (49).

In the novel Williams tries to articulate the sense of historical transition and change in Wales and England and the interrelations between the two countries and how all these social alterations affect the individual. As De Michele argues, *Border Country* is a narrative that reveals the underlying connections between the multifaceted collective and personal elements and struggles in the Welsh village of Glynmawr on one hand, and the broader matters and social energy that were projected towards that village far from beyond the border (22). The association between general social change and the developments in rural life and its implications in the realities of its inhabitants is just what construes the structure of feeling of the time and places outlined in *Border Country*.

The structure of feeling in *Border Country* stems from Williams’ personal experiences and evinces itself most strongly as an embodiment of a communal experience. His time in Cambridge had instilled a certain level of articulation in him that he could never have grasped had he stayed his whole life in Wales. He employed his newly-found mode of expression to give the people back home a voice. In the introduction to the book *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives* (1989), Terry Eagleton maintains that Williams brought together the best traditions of Cambridge: “close textual analysis, which Williams dubbed ‘historical linguistics, and ‘life and thought’ which Williams termed ‘society’ or ‘cultural history’” (3).

De Michele points out that Williams' "exile" was needed in order for him to achieve "the distance and consciousness of oneself," so that he could fully grasp the intimate bonds that tie an organic community together (28). Terry Eagleton also discusses Williams' "exile," stipulating that Williams had to "turn backwards so that he could keep moving forwards" because like other exiles he had to "discover, reinvent almost his own social history," move beyond his acquired "Englishness" and reaffirm his identity (5).

Within the pages of his literary work, Williams tries to capture the general state of transition that took place in England and Wales during two generations. By juxtaposing two historical periods Williams is able to illustrate "the residual, corporate, emergent and pre-emergent cultures" (Williams, "Literature in Society" 33-37) as they actively and progressively engage in the cultural process as a whole. The shifts in time and place help the reader see how the past, present and future intermingle to define the lives of individuals in society. According to Jon Nixon, Williams sees history as now; "that now is slipping into its own history; that yesterday is always a part of tomorrow. . . past, present and future are "structured into the experience of interpretation, a process he [Williams] terms 'the tenses of imagination'" (149).

Matthew's life in the present gives the reader a glimpse into the corporate culture of London and Wales. Williams succeeds in illustrating the contrast between Wales and England geographically, culturally and personally. On the first page of the novel the reader sees Matthew Price running to catch the bus; at this initial stage in the story, the split in the protagonist's character is established. He enjoys the spontaneous, carefree run because it is a "break from the contained indifference that was still his dominant feeling of London." He then adds that "You don't speak to people in London...in fact, you don't speak to people anywhere in England" (Williams, *Border* 9). This English reserve is a far cry from the talkative ease with which the Welsh conduct themselves. At one point in the novel, as Matthew is on a train returning to England, an old Welsh woman sits beside him and exhibits no qualms about sharing every little detail about her life with him even though it was the first time they had ever met.

On more than one occasion Matthew contemplates the map which shows the border between England and Wales. He looks at the "familiar network of arteries, held in the shape of Wales, and the east of the lines running out and elongating, into England. The shape of Wales: pig-headed..." (Ibid 12). At one point he remarks that Wales always stays with him wherever he goes: "Whatever it is, it goes with you and comes back with you" (Ibid 300). In a review of *Border Country* Brian

Morton points out that at the beginning of the novel Matthew seems to be somewhat disconnected from his past life in the village, but towards the end he realizes that he always carries his village with him; his memories are not just some abstract nostalgia. Morton continues to argue that as Matthew witnesses the last days of his father's life, he discovers "that his values are at root his father's values; that his life is a continuation of the inquiry that his father had carried on in his" (618). This aspect of the novel brings home Williams' notion of the continuity of cultural values. Matthew represents the mentality of the corporate and to a great degree the emergent culture, and he is shaped largely by Harry, a spokesman of the residual culture and past values. At numerous times in the novel, Morgan points out the similarities between Matthew and Harry. In a statement to Matthew, one character shows how Harry's experience will not die with him: "A life lasts longer than the actual body through which it moves" (qtd. in Morton 618).

In a sense, the concepts of corporate, residual, emergent and pre-emergent cultures are flux ones in themselves and their interrelations. They are not fixed in time and space. In the past narrative of the story, as Harry and Ellen struggle to establish a life in the patch, the reader can see the different dimensions of the structure of feeling as it fluctuates within the folds of the Williams' various levels of culture. At times Harry seems to convey the pre-emergent experiences wherein "the structure of feeling is so called [pre-emergent] because it is essentially different from the structure of what is already known, formed and articulated. It is often apprehended as an isolated and individual, a private feeling..." (Williams, "Literature in Society" 37). When Harry refuses to become Morgan's partner, Morgan protests exclaiming "...you never say what you really think" (Williams, *Border* 179). In a later episode the omniscient narrator remarks that as Harry hesitates to give an answer, Morgan watches him seeing "what he had often seen before in this man: an extraordinary tension between what was felt and what could be said" (Ibid 184). This tension between language and experience in the realm of feeling captures the interplay between past values and present change. Harry clings to his heritage and rejects to become a part of capitalist culture. Harry's disharmony between feeling and articulation continues into the present narrative. When Matthew comes to visit him during his illness Harry explains to his son that "I can feel...It isn't what is said" (Williams, *Border* 79).

In another linkage between past and present, Matthew shows how the historical conflicts between Wales and England still leave their marks on the landscape:

All that had been learned of the old fighting along this border stood out,

suddenly, in the disposition of the castles and the roads. There on the upland had been the power of the Lords...Their towers now were decayed hollow teeth facing the peaceful valleys into which their power had bitten...the decayed shape of violence...where the devil's heel had slipped as he strode westward into our mountains. (Ibid 292)

Even though there is some residual bitterness in the tone here, still one gets the impression that such violence is best kept at bay in the past.

In *Border Country*, Williams attempts to bring the culture of his home country to life. The structure of feeling in Wales is best manifested in the closeness of the community in Glynmawr Valley. The protagonist relates his account of the solidarity among the members of the patch. Right from the start when Matthew / Will gets off the train at Gwenton and starts walking towards the valley, he is surprised to find that Morgan Rosser has come to pick him up even though no such arrangements had been made. Morgan states in a matter-of-fact manner "You thought we'd leave you to walk then?" (Williams, *Border* 14).

De Michele contends that the interactions between Matthew and Morgan illustrate the cultural differences between London and the Welsh countryside. In the initial encounters Matthew represents the "impersonal city attitude to human relationships," whereas Morgan gives life to "the rural community attitude to personal relationships" (23). The clear tension between the two characters arises from two contrasting mindsets that foreground two distinct social practices.

In another incident, Will objects to all the neighbors calling on his mother to inquire about Harry's health: "It's nice of them to call. But what is this, an illness or a tea-party?" Ellen simply replies "Only it's nice that the neighbors call" (Williams, *Border* 81). Matthew has been away in London for so long he seems to have forgotten the ways of the people in the patch. The neighbors' insistence on visiting Ellen and Harry is a demonstration of their solidarity and unity. They only want to show their support and dedication for their neighbors. Matthew realizes how he has been out of touch with the Glynmawr status quo when he admits "I've been away too long...I've forgotten it all, and I can't bring myself back" (Ibid 82).

Further on in the novel Matthew finds out that Dr. Evans is married to Eira, and it annoys him that no one had mentioned this fact to either of the men. He states angrily that "This is supposed to be a place where we all know about each other" (Ibid 149). Even though Matthew has been away for so long he still remembers the closeness of the people in the valley and resents being kept in the dark like an outsider. As the novel progresses, however, Matthew rediscovers his roots and once

again can embrace the communal spirit of his home country.

The structure of feeling is most apparent at the end of the novel after Harry dies. As soon as news spread of the death,

a process began which was to take over and control all that had happened: a deliberate exertion of strength by this close community, made as always, for its members who needed help, but made also, it seemed for the sake of the village, to prevent anything reaching out and disturbing its essential continuity. (Williams, *Border* 323)

Here individuals in this society come together in order to guarantee the constancy of their shared way of life. Even though Matthew is disturbed by the way the village seems to “deliberately” forget Harry he knows deep down that the villagers are not acting out of insensitivity to his grief:

...it was not unfeeling. It was a learned reaction, by which the process of restoring the common life was at once begun...It was as though the village had accepted death so deeply that it allowed no room for personal reaction to it...The shock was overborne and contained by this insistent application of a different energy. (Ibid)

In this emotionally-charged scene the village is portrayed as an organic unit that protects the stability of its members. The life-preserving energy referred to above could very well be the structure of feeling that is articulated by Williams.

The General Strike of 1926: Socialist Dimensions

One major dimension in the spectrum of the structure of feeling in the novel is the working class movement that began in the 1920s. Williams examines this social development by giving an account of his characters’ personal experiences and recollections regarding the General Strike of 1926. This strike is explicitly dealt with in Chapter Four of the novel. The railway men go on strike to support the miners who are locked out. All the workers pull together in order to pressure their capitalist employers and the government to raise wages.

In this aspect of the novel William’s socialist and Marxist tendencies come to light. The strike is an indicator of the working-class revolt against the ruling class. Morgan explains to Harry:

...we're working class, Harry, united for common action. The miners are fighting their own battle against their employers...We're not fighting companies, we're fighting the government...We're saying we're the country, we're the power, we the working class are defying the bosses' government, going on to build our own social system. (Williams, *Border* 86-7)

The inequality of the classes has brought on what Marx terms an antithesis embodied in the working-class defiance of the government and the company owners.

In his book *Marxism and Literature* Williams refers to the emergence of the working class back in nineteenth century England as "elements of the cultural process that are alternative or oppositional to the dominant elements" (*Marxism* 127). However, the emergence of this new class exemplifies a process which is "likely to be uneven and is certain to be incomplete" (Ibid). The new working-class brought with it distinctive cultural elements which may still be seen as emergent forms in Williams' mid-twentieth century novel. His novel depicts the ongoing struggles and newly acquired cultural values and formations of the working class both personally and communally.

Even the socialist concepts of brotherhood and comradeship surface at various places in the book. When Major Blakely tries to persuade Harry to return to work because "there is no dispute about the railway men's wages," Harry responds "Part of a fair price for any man is a fair price for his brother. I wouldn't want it if the miners went without" (Ibid 117). Members of the working class need to make common sacrifices if they are to stand up in the face of the ruling class. In another instance Morgan seems to be echoing Marx's phrase, "Religion is the opium of the people" when he says "Aye-singing is the opium of the Welsh" (Ibid 208).

Needless to say, all the efforts and sacrifices of the working class are in vain. The companies and the government finally get their way. The strike is called off unconditionally and certain members like Harry and Tom Rees are penalized for taking part. Rees gets transferred and Harry loses his job for quite a while.

Morton takes up the issue of Williams' socialism. According to Morton, Williams was a relentless advocate of a common culture and a classless society due to his conviction that class division leads to a distortion of "life of both sides of the divide" (616). Morton elaborates further by stressing that Williams was against the split in labor from the "separation between mental and manual labor, between administration and operation, between politics and social life" to the "last recess of the division of labor...this recess within ourselves, where what we want and what

we believe we can do seem impassably divided” (Williams, qtd. in Morton 616).

In the novel, the reader detects Williams’ objection to the division in labor in his portrayal of the General Strike. The working class does not fathom any separation between different labor occupations. What applies to the miners applies to the railway men. In their eyes there is no separation in the lives of all workers. In addition, the lack of communication between the administrators of the railway and the workers operating the trains causes the dispute to escalate beyond any reasonable resolve.

Morton mentions one further example that illustrates Williams’ opposition to the division of labor. Even though Harry Price is a railway man he originally comes from a family of farmers. That is why Harry spends so much time planting and working the land. It seems to be his “effort heroic but doomed, to refuse the divisions forced upon him [Harry] by social change” (Morton 617). Although Williams yearns for the England’s predominantly rural past, he does not fail to acknowledge the inevitability of industrial change as part of the ever-evolving “structure of feeling” amidst various generations.

Williams’ socialism is the topic of discussion in the article “The Commitment to Socialism” by Michael Sprinkler. According to Sprinkler, Williams displayed a lifelong commitment in his writing to politics when it is perceived as a channel through which any society identifies its formations of power and distributes resources, opportunities and responsibilities to its members. Williams focused on Marxism because, to a certain extent, it combined Williams’ “evolving political positivism” and the newly rising Marxists theories in the west from Georg Lukasc and Antonio Gramsci to the Frankfurt School, Jean Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser (Sprinkler 559).

The defeat of the working class takes its toll on Morgan the most. He is disillusioned by the repercussions of the failed strike and he gains “insight into the real nature of society...The brave show was displaced in an hour by a grey, solid world of power and compromise...the world of power and compromise seemed the real world, the world of hope and ideas no more than a gloss, a mark in the margin” (Williams, *Border* 153). Consequently, Morgan gives up his industrial job and starts his own business dealing. At first he is hesitant; he tells Harry that he has always seen himself as a worker whereas “a dealer’s a kind of capitalist... Small, yes, but that’s his economic basis” (Ibid 157). He proceeds, however, and slowly builds a business which eventually becomes an institution in the village. The various directions that the economic realities take further embody the fluidity of the “structure of feeling.” Once again, the diverse cultural and personal emotional

energies are articulated by Williams in this novel to illustrate the flux dynamics of culture at the residual, corporate, emergent and pre-emergent levels; hence, the “structure of feeling” is sturdy, yet prone to fraction and realignment in an incessant flow towards a multitude of orientations.

Towards the end of the novel the differences between England and Wales seem to gradually dissipate as Matthew makes his way from the mountains of Wales to the flatlands of the British villages to the smoke and ques of London. He finally ponders that “... perhaps we are all country people come to London, but none of us look it. There isn’t, hurrying through, that much difference between people...What does it matter now where we are from? Here the past is very quickly left behind” (Ibid 347). Communal living is once again emphasized; amongst the crowds in London, people are constantly on the move and, for the most part, have no time to dwell on individual differences. As Williams declares in *The Long Revolution*, “...the center of value is always in the individual human person - not any one isolated person, but the many persons who are the reality of the general life” (Williams, *Long* 279). Matthew seems to cross the border between his two ways of life and embrace both his Welsh heritage as well as the importance of his London studies. On the final page Matthew declares that after so many years of traveling to and from Glynmawr, he has finally completed that journey he started on when he first got his scholarship to Cambridge and his exile and to a certain extent, Williams’ as well, has come to an end; he succeeds in jumping the border.

Conclusion

Williams employs artistic creation in his novel in order to subject the knowable to the unknowable thereby rendering it somewhat more known. By probing into the underlying diversity and correlations between England and Wales at two diverse times in history, Williams succeeds in harmonizing the two distinct constituents of his own identity. His individual experience extends to the collective as he gives rise to the voice of his countrymen and the structure of feeling, otherwise referred to as “social experiences in solution.”

The structure of feeling as demonstrated in Williams’ novel becomes his experiential embodiment of this seemingly elusive concept. Williams endeavors to render his complex concept more palpable by tapping into the duality of his subjective experience within the more comprehensive framework of communal interactions. It is in the arena of artistic expression that Williams attempts to articulate the varied realities of lived experience in relation to the incessant cultural process as a whole.

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