



The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act

Fredric Jameson

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Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, opposes the view that literary creation can take place in isolation from its political context. He asserts the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts, claiming it to be at the center of all reading and understanding, not just a supplement or auxiliary to other methods current today.

Jameson supports his thesis by looking closely at the nature of interpretation. Our understanding, he says, is colored by the concepts and categories that we inherit from our culture's interpretive tradition and that we use to comprehend what we read. How then can the literature of other ages be understood by readers from a present that is culturally so different from the past? Marxism lies at the foundation of Jameson's answer, because it conceives of history as a single collective narrative that links past and present; Marxist literary criticism reveals the unity of that uninterrupted narrative.

Jameson applies his interpretive theory to nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, including the works of Balzac, Gissing, and Conrad. Throughout, he considers other interpretive approaches to the works he discusses, assessing the importance and limitations of methods as different as Lacanian psychoanalysis, semiotics, dialectical analysis, and allegorical readings. The book as a whole raises directly issues that have been only implicit in Jameson's earlier work, namely the relationship between dialectics and structuralism, and the tension between the German and the French aesthetic traditions.

The Political Unconscious is a masterly introduction to both the method and the practice of Marxist criticism. Defining a mode of criticism and applying it successfully to individual works, it bridges the gap between theoretical speculation and textual analysis.

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