

Critical thinking on literary theories

[War, Cold War](#)



" America" is a poem written by Allen Ginsberg in the 1958. The poem revolves around the life of the speaker, who feels overwhelmed by life in U. S. Specifically, the speaker is dissatisfied with the level of capitalism in the country, which makes him admire his communist upbringing. He also conveys his admiration for Marxism. Although there are several literary strategies (put forward by different theorists) on the best means to interpret a text, none would be more appropriate than Michael Foucault's in analyzing Ginsberg's poem.

In his articles " The Archaeology of Knowledge" and " What is an Author?" Michael Foucault advocates for a strategy that makes a distinction between the author and the piece of work. To put this into context, a simple example would be helpful. The name Newton arouses the idea of scientific inventions. This is because Newton makes a set of propositions related to the field of Physics. However, when interpreting Newton's work, the focus is not merely on Newton; the ultimate aim is to understand the ideas presented by Newton within that body of knowledge (Physics).

Although Foucault is right on the point that readers should make a distinction between the author and the work, it is not entirely possible to dissociate the author from his or her work. This is because the author gives the work a certain degree of identity. In today's writing, for example, it is almost impossible to have a set of ideas without attaching the propositions to a specific author. Again, attaching a text to a specific author facilitates comparison between texts presented by different authors. Nevertheless, Foucault's theory would be appropriate in analyzing the poem because he urges for a discourse in interpretation of a piece of work. The discursive

strategy of interpreting a text enables the reader to judge the text in a non-restrictive environment. Therefore, the reader is at liberty to build meaning of the text from different angles, thus eliminating the need to look at the text from a singular perspective. For example, the reader would not be restricted to examining a specific variable rather he or she would be interested in a wide range of variables as indicated by the author. This, in turn, would open the avenues for examination of the set of relations between the variables raised by the author.

Again, Foucault's theory would be the most appropriate in analyzing the text because language, power and desire of the author is not the ultimate aim of the interpretation, but just a means to understanding the basic level of discourse raised by the author. However, sometimes the reader has to look at the language used by the author in order to draw the concepts presented. For example, the language used by the author enables the reader to identify the signifier and the signified. Identifying the signifier and the signified would in turn facilitate a clear understanding of the concepts raised by the author. Lastly, Foucault's theory would be appropriate in interpreting the text would because has its basis on the human construction of knowledge. Generally, knowledge is socially constructed. This means that the debates that take place within the social precincts are meant to develop and build that knowledge. In this sense, therefore, both individuals and the society get involved in the process of constructing knowledge. The emphasis here is the process of construction.

Turning back to Ginsberg's poem, the poet raises a number of important concepts that can be examined using Foucault's theory. For example, the

poet follows a structuralism path in exploring the issue of Cold War. Therefore, the signifier and the signified are important in the poem. The signifier, which is the poet in this case, adopts a sarcastic tone to bring out the signified (the concept of the cold war). For example, in the fifth line of the poem, the author poses “ America when will we end the human war?”. Considering the background against which the poem is written, the poet delves into the highly polarized Cold War taking place between the late 1940’s all the way until the early 1990’s. The poet is disgruntled by the country’s overconcentration on the Cold War instead of focusing on the welfare of its people. This is evident when the poet states “ Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb”. The country’s leadership seems indulged into the manufacture of sophisticated war weapons hence prompting poet to cajole this state of affairs. The Cold War has misdirected the country’s attention from the issues that matter to the poet. As a result, a sense of neglect is evident when the poet says “ America I've given you all and now I'm nothing. America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956”. In this lines, the speaker expresses dissatisfaction with the fact that people who have done everything for their country are on the verge of neglect.

Through the structuralism approach, both the signifier and the signified conjure up an image of unnecessary Cold War. However, the structuralism approach used in the poem is limited in the sense that it brings out a singular meaning of the text. This is contrary to post-structuralism, which rejects the idea that literary texts have a singular meaning. Instead, post-structuralism supports the idea of bringing out different meanings from a single text.

Apart from examining the concepts of structuralism and Cold War, Ginsberg's poem also examines the concept of Marxism. By his own admission, the speaker reveals his love for reading Carl Max. He states " You should have seen me reading Marx". The admiration for the works written by Carl Marx affirms that, in essence, the speaker supports Marxism. This explains why the speaker would prefer a system where good looks would enable him to purchase goods from the supermarkets. An early upbringing in a communist state and the evident failures of capitalism make the poet want a class-less society in America. This is evident when he says " When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks?". In addition, almost the entire poem is laced with Marxist sentiments. From the ramblings about the Cold War to the narration about murders place every day, the poet expresses disgust for capitalism and his love for Marxism.

Psychoanalysis is another concept that is evident in Ginsberg's poem. As a kid, the poet was brought up in a communist state, which inspires his attitude. Ginsberg states " America I used to be a communist when I was a kid and I'm not sorry". This admission confirms that the poet's upbringing in a communist state shaped his personal development. Therefore, his attitudes and mannerisms mirror childhood experiences. For example, he admits to smoking marijuana when he gets the chance. He also castigates the American system for encouraging capitalism and for engaging in a Cold War with Russia. The highly competitive nature of U. S. has driven him into a psychological resistance. As a result, he has developed a defense mechanism because his conscious and unconscious drives are in conflict. This has created an emotional disturbance within the poet's mind, which he

tries to express through the monologue.

After moving to the U. S., the poet finds it hard to fit in well with the new societal structure. As a result, he blames the system for his failures. For example, he says about the Time magazine “ It's always telling me about responsibility. Businessmen are serious. Movie producers are serious. Everybody's serious but me”. The high level given to personal responsibility seems too much for the poet to bear. The individualism surrounding every activity confuses and frustrates the poet hence the anger. All these events reveal a psychoanalysis concept, whereby the poet cannot alter his childhood dreams and aspirations after shifting to a country with a new culture and societal structures. Instead, he admonishes the system, blames it for his failure and conveys a non-apologetic love for Marxism and communism. The prison within which the poet finds himself confined in limits his sociological freedom.

Allen Ginsberg's poem “ America” is best interpreted using Michael Foucault's theory. The theory finds relevance in interpreting the poem because the focus is not on the author but the issues raised by the poet. Again, the theory encourages the reader to interpret the text as a discourse thus building the reader's knowledge of the discipline instead of letting the author cloud the reader's judgment.

Works Cited

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