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Ideological Position of Contemporary Culture as Related by Eggers, Foer, and Morrison

Definitive conclusions regarding contemporary literature and the ideological position it takes have yet to be conclusively drawn. What is clear is that writers of the twenty-first century have departed greatly from the predecessors of the previous century in terms of their place within the culture and understanding of it. While difficult to make broad statements about American literature as a whole due to its diversity, it is possible to closely analyze three popular works and connect similarities, which can then be used to make broader statements about the culture as a whole. Three books that have been widely printed and sold and also are clear departures from literature of last century are Dave Egger's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and Tony Morrison's *Beloved*. The languages in these novels share a common thread of being confessional writing, which uses art as a form of cathartic healing from past struggles and quell present fears. The characters in these novels are living through the fears and anxieties of the current culture. The ideological positions in each are one of outsiders of the traditional political, economic and religious structures of society, but outsiders within a community of insiders. In many ways, this reflects the "hipster phenomenon," in which they are tightly woven "in-groups" who accept each other like family, but are wary of those outside of their group. All of the three books in question are popular with the youth culture of the United States. Sometimes called Millennials, or hipsters, regardless of any doubt in the face of these works, one thing is clear, they are popular with the

readers who came of age in a post-9/11 world. As a result, they hold keys to drawing conclusions about the contemporary culture and its literature.

Douglas Kellner, in his book *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Post-modern* has an essay titled “ Social anxiety, class and disaffected youth” believes that the current generation of youth, while not being conscripted for wars as previous generations have been, are fighting an ideological war within themselves. Each individual considers his or herself a warrior for their own cause, regardless of whether or not the rest of the world finds it trivial. Even a kiss can mean everything and nothing, “ We’re kissing each other but so much more, kissing like warriors saving the world, at the end of the movie, the last two, the only two who can save everything” (Eggers, 148). Kellner believes that the current generation through art articulates their “ social anxieties of working- and middle-class people in an era of economic insecurity in the United States and elsewhere” (Kellner, 125). Their art “ articulate(s) fears of downward mobility in the contemporary era and provide[s] allegories concerning social anxiety over losing one’s job, home and family (Kellner, 125).

If family as the basic unit of society, and traditional a refuge from the pains of the outside world, then uncertainty in a world with terrorism, economic uncertainty, is found in contemporary literature in distrust in government, religion, and the belief that even the most safe of refuges, the family, is not safe from being taken away. This is certainly a theme reflected in Eggers *A Heart Breaking Work of Staggering Genius* where the worst fear, loss of parents at a relatively young age, is realized. Oskar for his part in Foer’s “ *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*” seems to distrust anything nice in his

life when he tells his mother, “ Nothing is beautiful and true” (Foer, 43).

Morrison’s protagonist Sethe spends much of the “ Beloved” dreaming about memories of “ Sweet Home” that she has been removed from: “ There was nowhere else gracefully to go. They were a twosome, saying “ Your daddy” and “ Sweet Home” in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her” (Morrison, 10).

Foer’s character Oskar Schell can only be understood as a product of the current culture’s post 9/11 environment. Anyone who has spent time around “ kids today” can relate to his use of language and humor. It is a harsh humor, fueled by sarcasm. This can be understood as a realistic way to deal with an uncertain world. There is cynicism within the humor as well, but humor rather than being a product of that cynicism, is the nepenthe to it.

At the start of the novel, Oskar speaks of his desire to train his anus to speak. He muses, “ If I wanted it to be extremely hilarious, I'd train it to say, 'Wasn't Me!' every time I made an incredibly bad fart” (Foer, 1). Such humorous reflective continues throughout the book. He also suffers from a condition, which has only been recently identified, ADHD, and some interpretations might lend itself to a spectrum disorder on the autism scale. He also has rejected the faith of the previous generations culture, and as an ADHD person in the Internet age, he is eclectic, he considers himself an atheist, inventor, adventurer, Scientist, adventurer, and loves the French language. More than any time in the past, the current culture has moved away from the traditional lifelong careers. Corporations in an out-sourced, globalized economy do not show loyalty to their employees, and workers choose to follow George Conrad’s advice to “ have a lived life instead of a

career.” The generation is restless and not interesting in being a cog in a system that does not value them, they want to not just to one thing, but to do everything since, “ Sometimes I can hear my bones straining under the weight of all the lives I'm not living” (Foer).

The previous quotation is simple prose, which conveys powerful truths. The prose in all three novels and use of language is not flowery. It is simple but carries weight and import by conveying a truth that resonates deeply with readers of the current culture. The language is honest, which allows it to be healing. Jo Gill, author of “ Modern Confessional Writing” analyzes the language in “ A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius” and considers this to be example of nouveau confessional writing. She quotes literary critic Erica Wagner who “ Describes Dave Eggers’s A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius as ‘ heart healing,” for example (cited in Moss 2001) and Suzette Henke, here discussing contemporary life in writing, or “ life-testimony’, terms it ‘ scrptotherapy’ (200: xiii) – a term which implies the need, and delivery, of a cure.” Wagner continues and writes, “ modern confessional writing’s acute awareness of the volatility of its (necessary) audience generates a profound skepticism about the likelihood of forgiveness or reintegration” (Wagner, 7).

Reintegration in all three works is impossible. Meaning, what has been lost cannot be regained. These are not homecoming novels; these are about acceptance, and the humorous language and perspective that lead not to solving one’s problems but coming to a place where they are not so impinging. The language in al three represents paradoxes that define our age. Oskar realizes that “ You cannot protect yourself from sadness without

protecting yourself from happiness” (Foer, 180). This realization comes towards the end of the novel. It is the fruit of his realization that “ Every time I left the apartment to go searching for the lock, I became a little lighter, because I was getting closer to Dad. But I also became a little heavier, because I was getting farther from Mom” (Foer, 52). These paradoxes in the prose are just as present in Morrison. Sethe, who is on a search for past happiness in the future realized that “ Today is always here. . . Tomorrow, never” (Morrison, 47). Egger’s paradox is the inability to decide if the world as it is horrible or wonderful: “ I want to save everything and preserve all this but also want it all gone—can’t decide what’s more romantic, preservation or decay. Wouldn’t it be something just to burn it all? Throw it all in the street? (Eggers, 122).

In a similar vein, the language reflects a “ me against the world mentality.” The “ definers” or the powers that be, control everything in the world but the individuals’ thoughts and journey, since “ Definers belong to the definers, not the defined” (Morrison, 143). The escape from this is in the individual, since “ You are your own best thing” (Morrison, 205). The narrator in Egger’s memoir shows relief at his being able to break from the beliefs that the culture instilled in him by being able to teach the younger brother that he is raising anything he chooses:

His brain is my laboratory, my depository. . . He is my twenty-four-hour classroom, my captive audience, forced to ingest everything I deem worthwhile (Eggers, 49)

Elke Doker and Gunther Martens in their introduction to Narrative

Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel do not think that

language in first person novels is cynical, but that in a post-9/11 world there is sincerity embedded in language which is genuine, but is language, which fears the concrete. The world is a place of competing religious dogma, competing economic theories, competing political theories. Cynicism is directed at these structures, but an individual is genuine in the contemplation of self-meaning and in affection for those around him/her. They write that the referent of language is fickle because it rests in the, “broader context of the post-9/11 “ distrust of irony” in American literature, comparing the narratological concept of unreliability with the rhetorical topics of ethos and sincerity as ambivalently negotiated in Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*” (Doker and Martens, 4).

In the post-modern (or are we at the post-post modern?) age symbolism has taken on a confused meaning. Symbolism is a product of trivial traditions, which has trickled down into the cultures of modern societies. It is political, racial, religious, and it comes at a time where the symbolism of tradition and language is in the same paradoxical flux as everything else in the culture. In a world where concreteness has been leached from life and then the language to describe life, there is the looming question of what the meaning of meaning is. Eggers’ book is about doing things impulsively and asking what it means later, rather than the other way around: “ It’ll be hundreds of us, all running together on the beach . . . symbolizing all the things that that would obviously symbolize” (Eggers, 177).

The current generation perhaps suspects that understanding is impossible. Beautiful things are not true. What is more important to them is experiences, a lived life, and meaning in the moment, for there is never a tomorrow, only

a today. For Sethe in Morrison's novel, she is seeking, " Sweet, crazy conversations full of half sentences, daydreams and misunderstandings more thrilling than understanding could ever be" (Morrison, 52). The language in all three of these novels rebels against the notion that there are powers that be. The power that is lies in the individual. The world outside is not entirely knowable, the economic, religious and political institutions that for the course of human history have controlled the world, have betrayed the individual. Instead of revolting against them, or starting a revolution, the culture is content to create a mental disconnect between them and their own lives. This is the message that the three works discussed here convey, that life is hard, the expression of that through language is cathartic, and while wounds may not every be fully healed, life is worth living regardless.

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