An analysis of jim morrison’s poetry

Business

An Analysis of Jim Morrison’s Poetry Through the Eyes of a Fan. James Douglas Morrison’s poetry was born out of a period of tumultuous social and political change in American and world history. Besides Morrison’s social and political perspective, his verse also speaks with an understanding of the world of literature, especially of the traditions that shaped the poetry of his age. His poetry expresses his own experiences, thoughts, development, and maturation as a poet — from his musings on film at UCLA in The Lords and The New Creatures, to his final poems in Wilderness and The American Night.

It is my intention to show Morrison as a serious American poet, whose work is worthy of serious consideration in relation to its place in the American literary tradition.

By discussing the poetry in terms of Morrison’s influences and own ideas, I will be able to show what distinguishes him as a significant American poet. In order to reveal him as having a clearly defined ability as a poet, my focus will be on Morrison’s own words and poetry. I will concentrate on his earlier work to show the influence of Nietzsche and French poets such as Arthur Rimbaud and Antonin Artaud and the effect they had on Morrison’s poetry and style.

Morrison’s poetic style is characterised by contrived ambiguity of meaning which serves to express subconscious thought and feeling—a tendency now generally associated with the ‘ post-modern’ or avant garde. His poetic strength is that he creates poetry quite profound in its effect upon the reader, by using vividly evocative words and images in his poems.

While it is obvious that Morrison has read writers that influence his work, and their influence remains strong in subject and tone, he still manages to make

it his own in the way he adapts these influences to his style, experiences, and ideas.

We would expect to find remnants of quotes, stolen lines and ideas, in a lesser writer, but Morrison shows his strength as a poet by resisting plagiarism and blatant ‘ borrowing,’ in order to achieve originality in his own verse. As T. S. Eliot has said, “ Bad poets borrow, good poets steal.

” Morrison’s poetry is very surreal at times, as well as highly symbolic — there is a pervading sense of the irrational, chaotic, and the violent; an effect produced by startling juxtapositions of images and words. Morrison’s poetry reveals a strange world — a place peopled by characters straight out f Morrison’s circus of the mind, from the strange streets of Los Angeles boulevards and back alleys. Morrison’s speech is a native tongue, and his eye is that of a visionary American poet. He belongs to what poet and critic Jerome Rothenberg calls the “ American Prophecy . .

. present in all that speaks to our sense of ‘ identity’ and our need for renewal. ” Rothenberg sees this prophetic tradition as: Affirming the oldest function of poetry, which is to interrupt the habits of ordinary consciousness by means of more precise and highly charged uses of language and to provide new tools for discovering the underlying relatedness of all life . . A special concern for the interplay of myth and history runs through the whole of American literature. Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman saw the poet’s function in part as revealing the visionary meaning of our lives in relation to the time and place in which we live .

. . we have taken this American emphasis on the relationship of myth and history, of poetry and life, as the central meaning of a ‘ prophetic’ native tradition. The lasting impression of Morrison’s poems is that they attempt to render the dream or nightmare of modern existence in terms of words and imagery, quite bizarre and obscure, yet compelling at the same time.

An important aspect about the body of his work and his commitment to his particular style, one closely aligned to Rothenberg’s ‘ prophetic’ tradition, is that it is in the tradition of what other poets of his time were writing.

Morrison’s early experiments with poetry and prose, written between 1964-69, depict — in the language of an intellectually ambitious film student — the strong influence of people such as Nietzsche and Artaud, and his ideas on aesthetics, philosophy, life, and film in particular.

His early writings are the foundation on which he develops his poetic style. All the motifs, symbols, and imagery introduced in his first collection of poems recur continuously throughout his later works. The Lords and The New Creatures was conceived as two separate books; however, it was published as one book containing Morrison’s ideas and poetry. Essentially, it is a forum for the fleshing out of style.

The first half of the book The Lords: Notes on Vision, is a collection of notes and prose poems; while the second half, The New Creatures, is an assortment of poetry.

The Lords is a motley work of ideas and prose, loosely held together with motifs of death, cinema, and the reinterpretation of mythical and theatrical theory. While originality seems to be in short supply, and naive idealism in

abundance, it is interesting for the allusion to, and presentation of philosophical and aesthetic ideas, central to Morrison’s poetry. Stylistically, The Lords reflects his propensity for ‘ dark’ imagery and self-mythology, which would later be a fundamental characteristic of his poetry and performance.

The motifs that pervade all of his poetry abound; the ‘ city’, ‘ sex’, ‘ death’, ‘ assassins’, ‘ voyeurs’, ‘ wanderers’, ‘ deserts’, ‘ shamanism’, and so on.

The autobiographical and historical references in the poems reflect the myth making process of turning fact into fiction: the inner world of the psyche and its perceptions of surroundings, a mythological landscape of Morrison’s mind. The poetry, however, has a strong sense of place; the strong observational power of the astute outsider, works well in the invocations of strange border towns and locations. His vision of Los Angeles, or ‘ L’america’, is profound in its focus and impressions.

It is even stranger because of the ambivalent nostalgia Morrison seems to hold for the place, where he had lived and performed with the Doors: “ Los Angeles is a city looking for a ritual to join its fragments. ” At first, for Morrison, it was musical theatre that would attempt to provide the ‘ ritual’ for the city, using his shaman principles to try to ‘ join its fragments’, and bring his audience together.

When that failed, and the ‘ summer of love’ and the notion of hippie solidarity had dissipated, he turned to his poetry as the ritual that would piece together the fragments of his own experience.

Like Eliot’s ‘ fragments’ shored against his ruins in The Waste Land, Morrison’s words and poetry are the means by which he can make sense of his world and guard against his aesthetic mortality. However, as always in his poems, there is a sense of cynicism, directed toward himself as well as the reader. Almost as if, his suffering and sacrifices, made in the name of art and cultural freedom, were not for his own benefit but for the benefit of “ you,” the reader: Words are healing. Words got me the wound and will get me well

If you believe it. This segment from the absurdly titled, ‘ Lament for the Death of my Cock,’ reflects Morrison’s pessimism and poetic idealism.

The sense of suffering expressed in this later poem is also found in his earlier work The Lords, in relation to the idea of sacrifice for the good of all: “ What sacrifice, at what price can the city be born? ” Morrison’s early awareness of society’s ills, and his benevolent sense of social responsibility, meant that he had a personally doomed and intense experience of America and its ideals.

In particular, the ‘ Western Dream,’ as expressed in his apocalyptic invocation of a ‘ brave new world’ of dreamlike existence and ritual: “ We are from the West. The world we suggest should be a new Wild West, a sensuous, evil world, strange, and haunting. ” With his own experience informing his work, Morrison begins The Lords by addressing the reader rhetorically, as if revealing some truth about modern existence. He introduces his analogy of a society’s relation to place, in terms of a ‘ game’.

His vision of the city is one of a dystopian environment—it is an interpretation of the American condition and all modern civilisations.

Morrison sees the city in modernist and symbolist terms: the metropolis as a metaphorical reflection of society: We all live in the city. The city forms – often physically, but inevitably psychically – a circle. A Game. A ring of death with sex at its center. Drive toward outskirts of city suburbs.

At the edge discover zones of sophisticated vice and boredom, child prostitution. But in the grimy ring immediately surrounding the daylight business district exists the only real crowd life of our mound, the only street life, night life. Diseased specimens in dollar hotels, low boarding houses, bars, pawn shops, urlesques and brothels, in dying arcades which never die, in streets and streets of all-night cinemas. Like Eliot’s invocation of the “ unreal city” in The Waste Land, inherited from Baudelaire’s line about the “[s]warming city, city full of dreams, where ghost’s in broad daylight catch the walker’s sleeve,” there is a relation of person to place. Rimbaud’s perception of a city is more in line with Morrison’s, when he cries: “ O sorrowful city! O city now struck dumb, / Head and heart stretched out in paleness / In endless doorways thrown wide by time; / City the Dismal Past can only bless: / Body galvanised for sufferings yet to come. Morrison’s almost socialist perception of American society and its negative effect upon culture and people, is one of the main concepts behind The Lords.

He defines it as: the feeling of powerlessness and helplessness that people have in the face of reality. They have no real control over events or their own lives. Something is controlling them. The closest they ever get is the television set. In creating this idea of the lords, it also came to reverse itself. Now to me, the lords mean something entirely different.

I couldn’t really explain.

It’s like the opposite. Somehow the lords are a romantic race of people who have found a way to control their environment and their own lives. They’re somehow different from other people. The concept of the ‘ lords’ is a philosophical construct and a poetical device used to distinguish society as hierarchical.

Morrison’s idea of the lords can be related to Nietzsche’s view in The Will to Power (1967), of “ the Lords of the Earth — that higher species which would climb aloft to new and impossible things, to a broader vision, and to its task on earth. The lords are the poets and artists — the people who are revolutionaries, who seek to change the conformist culture in which they exist and lead society forward: The Lords. Events take place beyond our knowledge or control. Our lives are lived for us. We can only try to enslave others. But gradually, special perceptions are being developed.

The idea of the “ Lords” is beginning to form in some minds. We should enlist them into bands of perceivers to tour the labyrinth during their mysterious nocturnal appearances. The Lords have secret entrances, and they know disguises. But they give themselves away in minor ways.

Too much glint of light in the eye. A wrong gesture.

Too long and curious a glance. The Lords appease us with images. They give us books, concerts, galleries, shows, cinemas. Especially the cinemas. Through art they confuse us and blind us to our enslavement. Art adorns our prison walls, keeps us silent and diverted and indifferent.

Door of passage to the other side, the soul frees itself in stride. In contrast to The Lords, Morrison’s companion text The New Creatures, emphasises the nightmarish existence of other ‘ creatures’ who are submissive and almost sub-species in their herd mentality and hellish existence.

The violent imagery and surreal nature of the verse in The New Creatures, creates a disorganised and chaotic collection of poetry that seems to have no apparent motive or logic. The content is highly subjective and foreign to most readers; some allusions and imagery are familiar in their generality, yet pointless in the apparent obscurity and juxtaposition. The poems’ personal content unfortunately makes most of The New Creatures inaccessible in their metaphorical and symbolic rendition of Morrison’s psyche.

In parts, Morrison evokes a tone and a cadence with the structure of word and image interplay similar in effectiveness to the lyrics he wrote for The Doors, some of which he actually performed: Ensenada the dead seal the dog crucifix Ghosts of the dead car sun.

Stop the car. Rain. Night. Feel. Most of the poems in The New Creatures seem strange and unrelated. Morrison gives the reader a clue to his method of poetry, by his comments on art forms like film, especially when his poetry is so obviously cinematic in its style and effect.

He states, with a reference to the modernist idea of art replicating ‘ stream of consciousness,’ that he was “ interested in film because, to me, it’s the closest approximation in art that we have to the actual flow of consciousness. ” Many of Morrison’s poems throughout his work are like film-clips in an avant-garde surrealist cinema. There is an intellectual, yet dreamy

quality to his juxtaposition of ideas and insights about the world. Like the main technique of crowd manipulation he used on stage, Morrison uses the pause for great effect, yet not in the conventional grammatical or formal sense.

Instead of a caesura, an ellipse, or a new line (all of which he also uses to effect), he uses an image as a barrier to overcome, to be ‘ broken through’: Savage destiny Naked girl, seen from behind, on a natural road Friends explore the labyrinth — Movie young woman left on the desert A city gone mad w/ fever This pause, this break in flow or subject (in this case the metaphorical ‘ labyrinth’) renders the verse as a staccato series of images rather than a progressive stream of ideas and words.

In other words, the structure of the poem does try to replicate the irrational logic of stream of consciousness.

Often these poems differentiate themselves from Morrison’s more coherent pieces; characteristically, they are like abstract paintings of violent and bizarre scenes, giving the reader a sense of the intoxicated state prevalent throughout much of Morrison’s notorious, alcoholic and drug-abused, life. Reading some of Morrison’s less adept poetry is like reading notes someone took while experiencing an LSD trip. This is what a vast percentage of them actually are according to legends of Morrison’s excesses.

The same elements combine in his more proficient poetry; in intonation, profound visions, states of consciousness, and hallucinatory images, all culminating in a unique contemplation of the world. His cinematic technique of image juxtaposition also emulates the effects of a ‘ psychedelic’

experience, which could also be interpreted as no less than an experience of Morrison’s world and the ‘ 60s itself.

Poetry, and his idea of the Poet, was the genesis for most of Morrison’s experience. Poetry inspired and vocalised his love of the cinematic visual, performance art, and musical lyricism.

It also expressed his most profound thoughts, philosophies, and beliefs; it was a means to relay his world, which was increasingly close to destruction. In The American Night, his poem ‘ An American Prayer’ echoes Frazer’s Golden Bough along with the philosophies of Artaud and Nietzsche. Morrison appeals in his lament for understanding, for a consensus that technology and so-called ‘ progress’ is not necessarily better or more exciting than the mythically imbued past: Let’s reinvent the gods, all the myths of the ages

Celebrate symbols from deep elder forests .

. . We have assembled inside this ancient and insane theatre To propagate our lust for life and flee the swarming wisdom of the streets . . . I’m sick of dour faces Staring at me from the T.

V. Tower. I want roses in My garden bower; dig? In this sense, his attitude toward modernity is one of disdain, similar to Eliot’s perception of a defunct Western civilisation in The Waste Land. Consistently, throughout his poems, Morrison is anti-TV, almost as if he sees it as responsible for contemporary society’s decline.

It is paradoxical in that he vehemently supports a view of the world through the camera lens of the filmmaker’s eye. Apart from this cinematic aspect

that carries through from his earliest work, the consistent use of dark and violent imagery, and the allusion to sublime philosophy and art, there is no one unifying aspect to his poetry.

There is, however, an element of autobiography in the poems, subtly placed in the symbols and motifs associated with the lead singer of the Doors: Snakeskin jacket Indian eyes Brilliant hair He moves in disturbed

Nile Insect Air In The New Creatures, references abound to his clothes, ‘ Indian’ visions, Alexandrine hair, and shamanic dance moves — it is a story about himself. We then are introduced to the poet’s perception of his reader: You parade thru the soft summer We watch your eager rifle decay Your wilderness Your teeming emptiness Pale forests on verge of light decline. More of your miracles More of your magic arms “ You,” are the reader along for the journey; “ we” are the ‘ lords,’ the poet speaks—enlightened ones, the ones who can see ‘ your wilderness’ . . America? He continues: ‘ You’ are lost now, ‘ we’ are still the one’s who can see what the reader cannot. Morrison invites us into his world, but the reader is always kept at ‘ arm’s’ length.

In the next section of the poem, we are introduced to the state of the world and its inhabitants; disease, despair, images of torture, and the ominous presence of death always lurking in the background. A strange exotic world is revealed, with rites and customs straight out of Sir James Frazer’s The Golden Bough: Bitter grazing in sick pastures

Animal sadness and the daybed Whipping. Iron curtains pried open. The elaborate sun implies dust, knives, voices. Call out of the Wilderness Call out of fever, receiving the wet dreams of an Aztec King.

The ‘ elaborate’ sun is elaborate in its context; the ‘ iron curtain’ forcibly opened reveals war, communism, Stalinist tyranny etc. The ‘ sun’ could be a reference to the east, the land of the rising sun (also the name of a city in Ohio); its place in the wilderness ‘ implies’ its ancient and customary qualities of meaning.

The Aztec King brings a whole new dimension and significance to the sun as the ancient Mayans used the blood of human sacrifices to strengthen the daily journey of the sun across the sky. The characters of the poems are ‘ creatures’ of a nightmarish world. It is only upon realising that the creatures are meant to be us—we modern humans—that the fragments of society, held up to us as a mirror of ourselves through the experience of the author, become familiar.

Robert Duncan, a poet from Morrison’s era, in a passage reminiscent of Morrison’s credo of ‘ wake up’ and the paradoxical consequence of his (Morrison’s) beliefs, perhaps best sums up the poet’s meaning and reason for creating such a world: It is in the dream itself that we seem entirely creatures, without imagination, as if moved by a plot or myth told by a story-teller who is not ourselves.

Wandering and wondering in a foreign land or struggling in the meshes of a nightmare, we cannot escape the compelling terms of the dream unless we

wake, anymore than we can escape the terms of our living reality unless we die.

Later in his life, as a more mature and serious writer, Morrison attempted to awaken from his own ‘ living reality,’ he had become very aware of the naivete of his early work. He reflects on the significance of some of his early ideas and acknowledges the limits of his experience and youthful literary talents in terms of an expression of his life, art, and as a ‘ prophetic’ poet: I think in art, but especially in films, people are trying to confirm their own existence. Somehow things seem more real if they an be photographed and you can create a semblance of life on the screen. But those little aphorisms that make up most of The Lords — if I could have said it any other way, I would have.

They tend to be mulled over. I take a few seriously. I did most of that book when I was at the film school at UCLA. It was really a thesis on film esthetics. I wasn’t able to make films then, so all I was able to do was think about them and write about them, and it probably reflects a lot of that.

A lot of passages in it — for example about shamanism — turned out to be very prophetic several years later because I had no idea when I was writing that, that I’d be doing just that. The motif of the city in Morrison’s poetry is as surrealistic as it is symbolic in the strange juxtapositions of vivid imagery, symbol, and metaphors of human consciousness. The truth is, one can never truly understand the mind of the American Poet. We are here, humbled by grandeur of his work, basking in the shadow of a creative mind we cannot comprehend.

I have based my life’s work off the poetry this one man has sent left behind, and here is my humble attempt to make a third person understand, not the poetry, but what I took away from it. I have reached a point in life where I feel the need to broaden my horizons, to move on from my never ending obsession with Morrison and his words, so I write these words not to have them read or heard, but as a rite of passage.

Goodbye Jim Morrison, and thank you for every thing. I shall forever be waiting at the harbor for the one day when the Crystal Ship comes in. Forever waiting for one last word to the world, from Mister Mojo Rising.