

# Considering schiller and arnold through claudia rankine's citizen



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To consider the social function of art is to endeavor to contemplate a question that has haunted great literary critics since the Greek philosophers Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. Two minds that both considered and offered explanations to this question in the 1700-1800's were the German Friedrich Schiller and the English Matthew Arnold. Both Schiller and Arnold offer explanations that are heavily focused on presenting literature as the pinnacle and model of self and societal harmony. Schiller's suppositions from *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* argue that art is the medium through which humans can defy the fractious nature of specialized society by presenting literature as a mode of balance that interweaves society's factions. Arnold's arguments in "On Poetry" and "The Study of Poetry" suggests that poetry, itself, is of the utmost significance in the way it harmonizes human ideals above all other facets of study and consideration. Although Schiller's and Arnold's theorizations on the social nature of literature are intertwined in explaining the paramount value of literature in society, Arnold's arguments suffer from exactly the fragmented systems Schiller warns against.

The second chapter of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* depicts Schiller evaluation of art being able to transcend fixed occupational categories as being supreme to Arnold's commentary where literature functions as both an expansion and a source of division. In summary of the second chapter of *Citizen*, it is a provocative evaluation of race and gender through the juxtaposition of Serena Williams against tennis, or black against Zora Neal Hurston's "sharp white background" (25). In this chapter, regardless of blatant and systemic racism, both of which Rankine explicitly

points out, the overarching critiques expose blatant white racial and cultural superiority through microaggressions, which run rampantly on a societal scale much larger than the international tennis setting. Rankine's critique continues by questioning the predetermined behavioral molds institutions inflicts on minorities, and how Serena, a black female who is the best tennis player in the world, is expected to act like "smiling blond goodness" by tennis commentators (36). Throughout this chapter, the most poignant moments are the one's that rhetorically consider language, once by pointing out that when Serena was an aggressive tennis player she was characterized as "insane, crass, crazy" and having "bad sportsmanship" (30). Ultimately, Citizen ponders the question of societal harmony by pondering societal and social injustices, guiding readers to consider the hurtfulness of language and the systems in which it operates.

Citizen is then engaged deliberately with a component of societal division, and is also a work both Schiller and Arnold would argue brings the self and society closer to harmony through the poetic address of fractious society. The multidimensionality of the work, though, would be more greatly and fairly appreciated by Schiller than Arnold. The dimensions that add artistic layers to Citizen are found in the presentation and visuals Rankine includes. The presentation of the work functions as an extended metaphor for precisely the tennis-sphere Serena finds herself in, as the chapter itself consists black lettering against a stark white background. Through this chapter's presentation and visuals, which artistically delve beyond words, letters, and prose, the paradox between invisibility and hypervisibility for black "citizens" can be addressed in multiple formats and in the multitude of

societal formats in which it exists. This paradox is in the way black citizens are marginalized in general representation spanning from education to government, yet, ostracized or differentiated when in the forefront of whitewashed backdrops.

Arnold's arguments in "On Poetry" suggest that "poetry is more intellectual than art" and more interpretive (183). While Arnold accepts literature in an expansive variety, he still argued that it is "in closer correspondence with the intelligential nature of man" and that "poetry thinks and the arts do not" (183). Arnold's expansive literary canon, then, may accept the second chapter of Citizen in its' evolved dimensions, but it would discount the integrity of the visuals a standalone and equal component of the piece. Whereas Schiller's work denotes the importance of not fragmenting human knowledge forms, arguing that when divided "the inner unity of human nature" would then be "severed too and a disastrous conflict set its' harmonious nature at variance" (486). The open mind of Schiller, which lacks the literature-focused hierarchy of arts of Arnold, is a more practical approach to how the arts might elevate self and human harmony.

Another aspect Schiller and Arnold can be compared critically is by discussion of the differential or commensurable qualities between literature and the rest of major human knowledge forms. In terms of history, Schiller doesn't directly discuss it as a medium, but uses ancient Greece as a historical example of harmonious society and calls for a lack of division in human knowledge forms. Using the Greeks as both an example of the harmonious society and a "fallen" society, Schiller notes that the "Greeks were wedded to the delights of dignity and wisdom, without falling prey to <https://assignbuster.com/considering-schiller-and-arnold-through-claudia-rankines-citizen/>

their seduction,” but warns that the eventual separation and singular specialization of human knowledge forms create division within “the inner unity of human nature” (485, 486). However, in “On Poetry,” Arnold specifically delineates the human knowledge forms of literature, art, science, philosophy, and religion. Rather than a harmonious society that calls to commensurate between these modes of knowledge, as does Schiller, Arnold creates a hierarchy with literature at the pinnacle, in part because “it is the most adequate and happy of the modes of manifestation through which the human pours its’ force (183). Rankine’s work is a work of poetry, but being poetry is not just what makes this work so powerful.

To fully consider this chapter of Citizen is also to consider the modern and historical context of the work as it is intertwined with history, popular culture, science, and art. To argue, as Arnold does though, that literature is all-inclusive of the best of these categories, while the individual categories themselves are limited and mutually exclusive is an unfounded conclusion. For instance, Rankine’s use of the line “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” is originally from Zora Neale Hurston’s “How it feels to be colored me.” Hurston’s essay was published in 1928 during segregation and Jim Crow oppression. To unearth this is to not only consider Hurston’s work, which partially discusses racial tensions from a childhood perspective, but to draw parallels between hidden historical and blatant ongoing forms of racial inequality. In terms of knowledge forms, again, Arnold’s lack of clear reasoning and evidence to support literature as the elite culmination of knowledge forms render Schiller’s open minded approach more feasible as an explanation for literature’s role in achieving societal

harmony. More difficult to explain are Schiller's and Arnold's arguments for how literature would actually play a role in societal harmony. Perhaps Schiller's theory is easier to grant approval because it is rooted in the claim specialized society is fragmented. Thus, it is easier to accept "Fine art" is Schiller's key to address disconnected society because the true artist and true art "gaze upwards" with high moral and free standards that stray from the market and "fortune" (491). The artist and the observer are both shown the freedom of artistic experience that is beyond the confining faculties of fortune, and this free artistic model of art is then the harmony- standard for the faculties it has released from the grip of market driven specialization.

By contrast, Arnold argues that "the reasons why the human spirit feel itself to attain a more adequate and satisfying expression in poetry than in any other of its modes of activity" cannot be fully pinned down (183). However, in "The Study of Poetry" Arnold does specify that poetry provokes "a higher truth and higher seriousness" than all other human studies (185). Then, the lasting seriousness and truth that poetry offers are the keys to the actualized self and a harmonious society. Aside from mentioning that that the truth and seriousness are "inseparable from the diction and movement marking its style and manner," Arnold's theory does lack a clear role and path for the poet outside of simply being innately good because great poetry inspires the greatest harmony. Therefore, Schiller's argument again, pairs more fluidly with Citizen because of the clarified stipulations for the artist and description of how this harmonious society would look. In Citizen Rankine engages with the injustice of racism and artistically meditates on the mentality and institutions which foster its' continuance. About art, Rankine criticizes an

artist that speculates black artist need to act white and the separation of black, "slavery," art from the expansive arts, saying that "any relationship between the white viewer and the black artist immediately becomes one between white persons and black property, which was the legal state of things once upon time" (34). In doing so, the prose is addressing the fractiousness of race in society by holding a higher moral standard for art, with the end goal of a society not separated by the fractiousness. A reason that this may further Schiller's point for the artist functioning as the mediator, is addressed in the chapter as well, stating that those who call out racism in society are "called insane, crass, [and] crazy" (30). While this point might function also to prove Arnold's point that poetry is truly superior to achieve harmony, the weight of the argument Rankine is making about racism escalates the moral standard Rankine is subjecting society to above the skilled writing. The freedom of the artist to make this point, even though in normal conversation it cannot be said sides most with Schiller. Therefore, although Arnold's argument does connect with the second chapter of citizen, Schiller's arguments connect more fluidly with Citizen by addressing the high moral standard necessary to foster discussion of how society becomes less fragmented.

In conclusion, Schiller's arguments about the role of literature in fostering a harmonious society by way of an open-minded approach with a clear specification for the purpose of the poet and clarification of what justifies a harmonious society make it superior to Arnold's argument. Arnold's argument lacks a clear role for the poet and a description of the harmonious society. Citizen is ultimately a good work of literature to serve as a test

between the theories of Arnold and Schiller, partially due to its' modernity allowing for a comparison which stands the test of time, but most importantly because it engages with a disunity of the individual and society. A weakness of this analysis might be that Citizen is a lyric overly engaged with fractiousness in society and is therefore catered to render Schiller's argument supreme. If a work less engaged with the societal division were presented, the skillful diction and style of good poetry could be argued as the source of inspired self and communal harmony. Although, this argument would still suffer from a lack of evidence due the self-acknowledged absence of explanation Arnold offers for poetry being able to trigger this harmony. In the end, though it seems, both Schiller and Arnold desire an environment fully accessible to the individual to actualize their harmonious self within their greater world environment.

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