

Essay on critique

Sociology, Immigration



Immigrant Experience and Teenage Love in Diaz's "How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl or Halfie)"

Throughout its history, one of the characteristics of the United States of America has been the immigrant experience that has developed on its soil. The hardships of these people, especially of those that come from Latin American countries, are one of the most important recurring themes in Junot Diaz's oeuvre. This famous Dominican-American writer has been showered with praise from critics both at a national and at an international level, earning him many prizes and distinctions, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, a MacArthur Fellowship and a professorship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This short story is one of his first published and most well-known texts; it has appeared in anthologies and he has read it aloud for a recording. Written in relatively simple language and covering at least one almost universal theme, the nervousness before a first date when one is a teenager, it is a story that can be read by anyone. Obviously, people with immigrant backgrounds, especially coming from Hispanic countries, are the ones that can better understand the story, including its occasional insertion of typical words or phrases in Spanish.

Besides the anxiety that lies under a first date when one is a teenager, the complexity of human thought, the hardships of immigrant life and misogyny are on display in this story. It is supposed to be a manual about dating according to the girl's ethnicity, written in a second person point of view, but it gives few pieces of actual advice, stating them lukewarmly and many times contradicting and hesitating on many points. This would seem to convey the troubles that the mind goes through during pubertal sexual

reawakening; the person that is advising seems to be an awkward male teenager whose family has come from the Dominican Republic.

Nevertheless, it shows the complexity of human thought as a whole, as the elements that are on display are universal, including the influence of family, the prevalence of fantasies, constant digressions, etc. As one may see, there are some autobiographical elements in the story, the most prevalent of which could be immigrant experience, which Diaz partook in. The clash between Dominican and American cultures, leading the protagonist to reject parts of his home culture both from individual undervaluing and to seem more American, is on display, as is the lower socioeconomic status that immigrants often belong to and specific elements of Dominican culture. For example, the treatment of women as objects that are inferior to men can be seen in the story.

As one can see, Diaz very effectively gives the reader a glimpse into the mind of an immigrant teenager about to embark on a first date, while presenting social problems as well. In an almost stream of consciousness fashion, rejecting classical logic, Diaz presents the viewer with the turbulent mode of interpretation that characterizes most humans, especially teenagers. What is left are the confused ramblings of a person who does not know how to love or exactly what to do when being confronted with the opposite sex, with which I believe most people can relate. The peppering of the story with Spanish words is effective, yet most of the time one cannot deduce the meaning of the words from the contexts. Nevertheless, it gives the story a Latin-American feel, which is very important with the message he is trying to convey. Furthermore, the very specific details, like the

government cheese or the picture with his naked cousins, allow the reader to form a very clear picture of what is happening.

I agree with the author on many of his arguments, including the confusion of a teenager towards love and the difficulty of immigrant experience; however, I do not agree with the racism that is prevalent in the story. I think that it is a universal experience that when one is a teenager love and how to deal with the opposite sex are somewhat of an enigma; when this is compounded by feelings of inadequacy both because of socioeconomic status and of cultural heritage, it is more complicated still. Nevertheless, I believe that Diaz achieves the reflection of what such a mind would be like. Another aspect of this subjectivity is the construction of your self with respect to others, more specifically, in accordance to their ethnicity. As one can see in the title, the manual dictates that you should hide different parts of yourself and behave differently according to the girl's race. This is also supported by Torstenson, for whom "the intended reader must act differently depending upon the race and social class of the person he is courting". I do not believe this central tenant of the story to be true; while it is undeniable that one behaves differently when around different people, I think that one should try to be his or herself all the time. This kind of discrimination weakens the bond of love, as you are entering it under false pretenses.

In conclusion, the story "How to Dat a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)" by acclaimed Dominican-American author Junot Diaz, reflects the turbulent mind of a teenager when first confronted with love, while still revealing important social aspects of society. In it, a study of how one should receive a girl on a first date reveals the misogyny, racism, the hardships of

immigrant life and the confusion that prevails in teenage thoughts about love, reflecting the complexity of human thought as a whole. Through the use of contradiction, hesitation, short sentences, a second person point of view, and Spanish words and phrases, Diaz effectively immerses the reader in immigrant culture as seen through the eyes of a teenager. While I agree that teenagers love is confusing for a teenager and that the immigrant experience is hard, I do not think that one should have to change who one is according to who he or she is with. Nevertheless, I believe that it is a great short story that teaches much about contemporary society, especially in those places that do not usually have a voice in the literary cannon.

Works Cited

Tortstenson, C. S. “ You Don’t Know Me: Subjectivity and Objectivity in Junot Diaz’s Short Story ‘ How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl or Halfie’ ”. Switchback. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.