Ideology And Historicism In Contemporary Literary Theory Essay, Research Paper

Ideology does not exist as an individual, independent entity. Unless one was self-raised from birth in the wilderness as a solitary soul, then ideology is a collective, cultural force that is taught. Even if we were raised like Tarzan by the apes, we would share the values of the apes- or, less drastically, raised alone in a cave, it would be highly unlikely that our values would be very different from someone who valued nature, or survival, sun/moon/rain worshipping, etc. Ideologies are illustrated, explained and demonstrated through the things we read. We have argued that the ideology of the author often taints the ‘meaning’ of the written text, but also that the author’s meaning is obsolete when the reader’s ideology supersedes the author’s and takes over as meaning. Ideologies exist, however, independently of one another. Cultural circumstances dictate the things we value; women, for example, are viewed and treated differently from culture to culture, country to country. Additionally, since we are taught the things we believe, it is entirely possible to separate imaginative sympathy and ideology when regarding a text.

The redundancy of this question makes my head spin. Literary criticism and literary theory separate theories, a.k.a. ideologies. We come up with a list of isms to categorize these ideologies- feminism(s), Marxism, (multi)culturalism, historicism… The Contemporary Criticism class itself teaches us to approach texts with these separate ideologies in mind and examine them with those ideological tools. Even the precursor to the Contemporary Criticism class teaches ideology and how to apply it to a novel, to approach that novel with an ideology that isn’t necessarily one we agree with.

A novel then can be appreciated politically and subjectively, if you will, for its competence or incompetence in illustrating the ideology of one or more groups of people. It may be appreciated in a colder, more scientific, examinative light as a brilliant piece in history, as Tuckers so ineloquently explains of Ruskin’s opinion of Browning’s poem. It can explain the human condition, examine its place in history, what it means to feminism, et cetera, and we all get to appreciate the intellectual value of the poem. Novels and poetry and literature can instruct- if we choose for it to do so. But it must be approached as a teaching tool- hence, we must bring historicism to the text, or Marxism, or whatever. But that cold calculation is far separate from emotional respect. The educational institution throws a list of books at us and tells us to study them. For what? Not for their emotional aesthetic. Hardly. The education system is a cultural and ideological tool for mass culture and unified thought. It seems natural that unified thought means unified ideology…. So? Don’t encourage the aesthetic. The educational system doesn’t give a darn if the student enjoys the book (that’s not the point), but whether or not they can drain every ounce of relevant intellectual information out of it. Really, who reads Heart of Darkness for pleasure anymore? It’s become an instructional tool to teach… what? Imperialism bad. White people bad. Abused natives. History history politics. But! Can Heart of Darkness be read for pleasure? Absolutely- depending on personal taste of course, which is different than ideology. I can appreciate it if I want to. It’s just a matter of taking it home and reading it for the sake of reading it- for the enjoyment of reading.

To what end? Aesthetic opposes intellect, right? Maybe not. Perhaps I should be asking, what is the point of literary theory and criticism? Literary theory opposes itself- it teaches us to examine the texts we have with ideologies. But by doing so, the meanings of the text are lost upon us. Dissect it and it is no longer in the hands of the authors. It is a historical thing yet something separate of era, something separate of its author and layered in meanings upon meanings, and part of a Canon that defines its worth by its author and its place in history. The things we read define us as scholars because we read or don’t read the things that are or are not intellectual. But intellect- literary theory- exists because of what it is not. Aesthetic. As Martha Nussbaum mentions, the public imagination and public rationality are both shaped and nourished by literature.

Visions of humanity- ideology are shaped by the aesthetic. Aesthetic is not in opposition with intellect, as Tucker states, but in symbiosis with it. While one exists because of what it isn’t (lest I get into semiotics here…) they also exist because of what the other accomplishes. Aesthetic, dreaming, imagination and possibility are the seeds of new ideology. Present ideology, once again drifting towards the Tucker team, will soon be past ideology. Why? Because nothing stays the same forever. The value of the aesthetic reader, he who reads for enjoyment, shouldn’t be discredited for not reading for the sheer intellect of it. Where would politics and economy and culture and our value systems be if it weren’t for people who have visions of a different social life. Things can always be better. Nor should I bash the intellectual reader, who wants to know why humanity is the way it is. Is the way we feel so less valuable than the way we think? Psychologists would have to say no- they make a living by it.

To conclude with cheese… the heart can say one thing while the head says another. It happens all the time. We may not be emotionally moved by a text but we sure as heck can read it intellectually. Or, heaven forbid, we enjoy a text for the way it makes us feel and then go and pick it apart until we’re blue in the face. Schools make us do it all the time.