

Individuals, Identity, and Interest Groups

Areins Pelayo

University of South Florida

ABSTRACT

Within his work *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, M.H Abrams contends that literary criticism tends to emphasize either one or two of four areas. These four areas are the work, the author, the world, and the readers. Historically, formalist approaches of literary criticism stress just the work itself while romanticist approaches stress the work's relationship with the universe, the author, and his or her readers. However, Abrams did not portend the rise of Postmodernism, which fails to stress any of the previous four areas. Indeed, Postmodernism approaches are prone to interpret literature by asking whether a work assumes either racial or gender biases, and emphasizes the cultural, or socio-economic and political circumstances that occurred during the production of a given work. Postmodernists believe that this approach will assist historically oppressed groups in gaining a sense of equality and self-identity. In this paper, I agree with postmodern goal, namely to help historically oppressed groups gaining a self-identity and equality; however, I disagree with their methods toward this goal. I first argue against "interested readings" for interest groups, since, insofar as interest groups are a collection of people, the important differences between individuals within the interest groups are abstracted away, and stunt the growth of an individual's self-identity within that interest group. After, I argue for a blend of formalism and romanticism, and I claim that this approach in literature is the best means for assisting historically oppressed groups to achieve self-identity. I then entertain an objection and argue that there should be nothing wrong with favoring a hierarchal model if it is a necessary condition for assisting historically oppressed groups.

Keywords: Literary Criticism, Identity, Formalism, Romanticism, Postmodernism, Immanuel Kant, bell hooks, Nominalism, Nagel, Racial Bias, Gender Bias

INTRODUCTION

Paying due attention to the bias assumption in literature, postmodernists such as Annette Kolodny argue that an important method of literary criticism is to recognize the partiality the work assumes in order to further self-identification for historically oppressed groups. Additionally, some postmodernists believe that Kolodny's approach is enhanced by not just the decentralization of the author's importance, but also with an emphasis in a wider method of examination in areas such as class, gender, race, and ethnicities. It appears that one central aim of postmodern readings of literature is to raise awareness for historically oppressed individuals, and help these persons gain a sense of self-identification.¹ While I agree with the central goal of postmodern literary critics, I do not believe their approaches are the best means to achieve this goal. As a result, the purpose of this paper will be to demonstrate a different method for literary theorists, in case they want to assist historically oppressed groups in their quest for self-identification. The first part of this paper will focus on interest groups, and the second part will concentrate on the author's position in relation to readers, language, and culture, in light of the arguments provided in the first part, that is, the arguments concerning interest groups. Equally important, in both parts of this paper, I will formulate arguments drawn or influenced by Virginia Woolf, Immanuel Kant, bell hooks, and other philosophers or literary theorists. The central point I will make in this paper is that individuals from several gender, ethnic, or racial backgrounds state their point of view as the "interest group," but this position fails to illustrate his or her own unique situation within that interest group and invalidates their self-identity; hence, the author and text's position in literature must be re-edified insofar as the individuals in these interest groups want to show their point of view as authors, that is, allow readers to comprehend, sympathize, or immerse themselves in the author's gendered, ethnic, racial or cultured artistic consciousness.

1. By "historically oppressed individuals," I mean those races and ethnicities that are practically absent from literary classics or canons. Indeed, "interested readings" are for interest groups that are either Hispanic, chicano black Asian, Arab, mestizo or from Native American ancestry; that is, whatever is generally accepted to be a historically oppressed group. Unfortunately, issues of "borderline identities" and issues in philosophy of race are beyond the scope of my paper and will not be addressed.

PART ONE: ARGUMENTS AGAINST POSTMODERN INTEREST GROUPS²

Those who endorse interest groups and interested readings in literature are right to critique Kantian formalist approaches to literature. Indeed, it is difficult to deny that Kantian “disinterested” readings do not ignore racial, gender, cultural, and ethnic dynamics. Indeed, Kant’s prescriptions for “disinterested” judgments may appear to have the unintentional consequence of reaffirming oppressive or racist beliefs or manners at the subconscious level. As a result, several interest groups properly retaliate, and reveal the hardly justified assumptions that underlie Kantian readings. However, these interest groups are not immune to criticism. After all, these interest groups cannot explain how an individual can validate his or her self-identity without merely being a person who shares a similar property within the interest group at hand. To explain further, bell hooks and Virginia Woolf appear to deny interest groups insofar as they are abstractions or universals, and instead adhere to a soft and variable strain of nominalism. For example, in her work *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf asserts that consciously writing with one’s own gender in mind distorts one’s work (Woolf [1929] 2010, 901–04). Further, I believe her arguments suggest that not only is such a hyper-conscious state detrimental to one’s writing, but also that most people share characteristics of both masculinity and femininity, though often revealed in different moments. As a result, Woolf’s underlying point could be that “masculine” or “feminine” are only particular moments of a certain sort, and do not have any pure existence other than their varying manifestation in writing. To illustrate, similar to how the color red is instantiated in different shapes and objects, or turns different shades when exposed to certain lighting, “femininity” and “masculinity” are just as elusive and inexact. To be sure, the biological aspects of “male” and “female” do have correspondences to the physical world, but insofar as the aforesaid adjectives are universals over and above particulars that have some property in common, then this is belief that Woolf, hooks, and I claim to be wrong. Thus, if nominalism is the belief that universals do not exist, that is, the belief there is nothing over and above a property other than the fact that it inheres to particulars,

2. To be sure, most postmodern theorists advocate reading for interest groups, also known as “interested readings.” That is, in contrast to the Kantian formalist approach adopted by “arts for arts sake” advocates, postmodernists believe that neither the author nor the work should be emphasized when analyzing literature. Instead, they hold that the political and socio-economic circumstances should be scrutinized, and seen as the primary forces that produce a literary piece. And so, postmodernism can be seen as retaliation to the “arts for arts sake” movement or Kantian-formalist “disinterested” readings.

then Woolf appears to have an underlying nominalist thesis since "masculine" and "feminine" are merely varying instances one reflects throughout writing; and therefore, an interest group for "feminism" or "masculinism" misses the mark, and makes the individual suffer from hyperawareness, or complete confusion of gender identity when writing (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2011).

Likewise, in her work *Post Modern Blackness*, bell hooks declares a critique against "essentialism" though, arguably, she also presents an indirect adherence to nominalism. For example, recollecting the definition of nominalism stated above, one may grant that bell hooks' arguments against "essentialism" are also against universals in general. Particularly, when hooks states how "critiques of essentialism...challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness," she means that collective labels such as "black" or "white" must be scrutinized since there are only particular individuals that moderately share those properties of blackness, or whiteness. Indeed, hooks further argues that in order to "affirm multiple black identities" and a "varied black experience," critics must attack essentialism on the grounds of racism since collective racism is less impactful on each individual's life (hooks [1990] 2010, 2514). Surely, it appears that hooks adopts nominalism since she emphasizes how being black is a property shared by individuals; and hence, highlighting this fact will subject individuals to direct contact with racism, instead of indirect collective racism. More importantly, I believe that hooks' arguments are not restricted to race since collective labels are used for languages, ethnicities, and cultures. To the point, when hooks declares how postmodernists should not be so quick to eradicate self-identity, since there are some people who have yet been able to declare such identity, I believe that her point is made not only for blacks, but also for Asians, Latinos, and Middle Easterners. Thus, the interest groups for these ethnicities, cultures, and races are delaying their members' ability to acquire a unique and mature self-identity or recognition of individuality.

PART TWO: IDENTITIES WITHOUT INTEREST GROUPS

If interest groups are indirectly stunting the growth of their individuals' identity, then there must be some prescriptions that avoid the obstruction of self-identity, or enhance and cultivate individual identity. As a result, I will attempt to offer some prescriptions by arguing that the importance of the author and text must be re-prioritized since individuals in these interest groups must not merely tell, but show

his or her point of view as an author, and ultimately, allow readers to comprehend, sympathize, or immerse themselves in the author's gendered, ethnic, racial, or cultured artistic consciousness. To elaborate, the possibility of this level of reader-author comprehension depends on a specific interpretation of Kant. To demonstrate further, I believe that Kant's "disinterested" judgments allow audiences to immerse themselves in the author's artistic psyche, but this immersion and reader-author level of comprehension is possible only if the author illustrates his or her unique point of view, or consciousness through the text; that is, the author must neither write in the point of view of the interest group nor in the manner of crude factual or querulous statements, but as illustrations (Kant [1790] 2010, 406–449). Ultimately, I believe that Kant's prescriptions further minorities' ability for self-identification through illustration since his theory allows for a plurality of "formal reasonings." Kant's "disinterested" judgments allow for plurality because his psychology of the soul rests on formal aspects of humans, such as reason, or logic. However, unfortunately, Kant does not mention the theoretical possibility for different "logics" or formal properties that each corresponding individual instantiates, yet this reading of his work is consistent with what he does say explicitly. Indeed, I believe these different formal properties, and "logics" are innate in each individual and this is not inconsistent with Kant's theory. After all, if one accepts how there are numerous methods of musical notation, and yet, at the same time, each method participates in the "formal property" of recording down music, or how there are different forms of geometry, and several different methods to prove one tautology, then I do not see how it is impossible that our innate "formal" features are different, though, not so entirely different that it renders communication un-meaningful.

On the condition that one accepts this plurality of "formal" reasonings, then he or she will be able to understand how the importance of the author must be reestablished in order for the author to not explain, but *illustrate* his or her artistic view point and obtain, or cultivate his or her self-identification while also allowing readers to immerse themselves into the author's psyche or consciousness. To elaborate on "illustration," there is an undeniable difference between the statements "he sneezed," and "inhaling, he shoots a violent mist from his nostrils," though, each sentence describes the same occurrence. Similarly, there is a difference between explaining what it's like to be black, Latino, Asian, and Middle Eastern, and showing the "what it's likeness" or his and her artistic consciousness (Nagel 1974, 435–50). Granted, whites have shown "what it's like" to be him or her, but I contend that the individuals in interest groups must discontinue explanatory and often querulous

compos mentis

works, and instead strive to increase production of illustrative works, such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and August Wilson's *Fences*. These two works are paragons of how individuals in interest groups can cultivate their self-identification through illustrations. Since, in the former, Morrison writes in the first person as a means to illustrate the struggles of two young black girls in a society where blue eyes and pale skin is perceived as most desirable, and, in the latter, Wilson uses poetic American slang and dialogue means to illustrate how familial problems transcend race and class. Furthermore, if one considers poet and literary critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's account on how audiences ought to receive a given work, that is, if the reader "pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward," the reader immerses him or her self into the author's "formal reasonings," and is able to affirm his or her self-identity and ascend to the level of reader-author comprehension (Coleridge [1817] 2010, 590). To further illustrate my points, consider the art of drama, the actor or actress must immerse him or herself into the character, and experience what is it like to be that character. Similarly, while reading dramatic literature, one is immersed into all the different characters rather than just one, and likewise, through immersion and illustration that the text provides, the reader can understand and affirm the author's identity. Consequently, it should be evident how on the condition that interest groups often hinder an individual's ability to achieve identification, the positions of the author and text must be re-emphasized. By re-emphasizing the author and text, critics allow these underrepresented individuals to nourish his or her identity through illustrations, and readers can obtain and re-affirm their identification through immersion and comprehension of the text.

OBJECTIONS

At this point, I believe a Marxist may object that I am propagating the capitalist agenda and vulgar consumerist behavior into the masses' sub-consciousness by asking for a reestablishment of the author and text, or perpetuating hierarchal values. Indeed, I acquiesce, though the Marxist must grant that these underrepresented individuals within interest groups have not been able to fully enjoy and participate in capitalism, or gain supremacy through the system in the way that whites have done. Moreover, such individuals have not participated in the self-interestedness so many whites already have and continue to experience. Now, I do not endorse any kind of supremacy, but if capitalism is a necessary condition for the historically

subjugated individuals to obtain a sense of self-identification, then the Marxist asks for the termination of self-identities that have hardly been cultivated. In fact, in her work *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, hooks shows how blacks eradicate their cultural identities in the U.S by imitating white and their aesthetics, and so a Marxist society would enforce the annihilation of cultural identity from both parties, but this demand seems intuitively unjust. Moreover, it is at least theoretically possible in a non-Marxist society for a black person to embrace his or her own identity and a white person to respect the black person's identity without necessarily eradicating his or her own white identity either. Thus, though the Marxist's arguments are potent, and weaken my thesis since I am endorsing a hierarchical system of values, but I believe that this is not a reason to dispose my arguments as entirely out of the question, especially because Marxism itself both in theory and practice is vulnerable to heavy criticisms.

CONCLUSION

In sum, I have argued that since interest groups interfere an individual's self-identity, reestablishing the importance of the author and text in literature, allows authors to achieve self-identification while also allowing readers to immerse themselves in the text and gain a level of comprehension with the author through illustration. Briefly put, interest groups are subject to criticism from a nominalist position. Indeed, I argue that Woolf, and, hooks adhere to the nominalist position while criticizing interest groups. If one accepts the conclusion that interest groups stunt the individual's ability to cultivate a self-identification, then he or she may accept my second argument that asserts how Kant's prescriptions of "disinterestedness" are consistent with the hypothetical possibility of individual's possessing different kinds of "formal" reasonings similar to how there are several ways to prove one tautology. Additionally, through illustrative texts, rather than explanative texts, individuals can present their artistic consciousness as authors and gain self-identification not only through the act of being an author, but also through readers when they immerse themselves in the text in order ascend to the level of comprehension with the author. However, the immersion of the reader with the text, and the affirmation of the author's self-identification, depends on the emphasis on the author and the text. Hence, I argue against postmodernist's "interested readings" and interest groups because they delay the maturation of an individual's identity. I also argue for the re-establishment of the author and text in

compos mentis

order for underrepresented authors to gain self-identification through illustration, and also for readers to comprehend an author's identity, or experience an author's poetic consciousness.³

REFERENCES

- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. (1817) 2010. "Biographia Literaria; Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 584–591. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- hooks, bell. (1990) 2010. "Post Modern Blackness." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B Leitch, 2509–2516. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Kant, Immanuel. (1790) 2010. "Critique of the Power of Judgment." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 406–449. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1974. "What Is It Like To Be A Bat." *The Philosophical Review* 83 (4): 435–450. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/stable/218391>.
- Rodriguez-Pereyra, Gonzalo. 2011. "Nominalism in Metaphysics." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta.
- Woolf, Virginia. (1929) 2010. "A Room of One's Own." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 893–905. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

3. I would like to give special thanks to the anonymous editors for their helpful suggestions and to Thomas Mann for his correspondence and work as a prime mediator.