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The Uncertainty of Coexisting Social Systems

The short story “Everyday Use” and the play *Copenhagen* have been similarly structured so that character relationships are the major focus of the narrative. This allows a careful analysis of the characters that are given certain roles by the author. Following a new historical critique of these two texts an understanding of the roles that society has created for individuals will be gained. A brief summary of the theory will be made with an emphasis on the aspects to be covered in this essay. More importantly it will be shown that in modern society there exists a bi-structured system that attempts to incorporate traditional and modern roles of parent/child relationships and of women. But in addition to showing this dichotomy, an analysis of the texts will also bring out the difficulty and near impossibility that a society, living by two sets of social standards, can function without detrimental effects. The most detrimental of these effects is the inability to resolve conflict because the characters follow different social systems and find it hard to compromise.

The beginning of modern literary criticism starts with the Formalist theory that takes a text and studies how it communicates with the reader. The tools of rhetoric and the nuances of poetics create the form of a text. From this form, Formalists not only derive their name but also the text’s meaning through a universal correct reading. But it became obvious that various readers didn’t come up with the exact same reading and as

the theoretical field expanded literary critics began to analyze outside on the text. New Historicism particularly began studying literature by looking at its affects on society. The basic idea of these new historicists is that a text can be affected by society because the author will use codes and relationships familiar to him/her in the text. In this way traditionally held views are propagated by the literature and the text begins to affect the society it's in. With this realization, New Historicism no longer looks solely at form nor at context individually in order to find meaning. It tries to find the various details of relationships between the text and the society. Instead of one unique reading of a text, multiple contexts create various meanings—in a kind of literary theory of relativity. This 'literary relativity' promotes that each reader will pick up on different aspects of the text and make certain connections with other aspects outside the text.

Relativity in society has changed much in how people interact with one another and how relationships are stereotyped or codified: parents, children, women, Americans, Africans, etc. It is evident to see how this changing perception of roles has affected modern literature when looking at how authors represent society through their characters. In looking at the short story, "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker and the play *Copenhagen* by Michael Frayn, it is possible to find societal values represented in the texts. The characters of Dee and Heisenberg demonstrate how children/parent roles have changed in modern society as compared with their parents, Bohr and Mama Johnson who represent more traditional roles. Maggie and Margrethe each demonstrate roles women play in literature with Maggie reacting as a traditional woman was presumed to act. Margrethe on the other hand is depicted as a more complex character whose sensitivity is an asset instead of a weakness. Most of the conflict between the characters arises from a central

lack of compatibility and is not alleviated or resolved until a common understanding is reached—until relativity is put aside or complementary is attempted.

First of all there is the relationship between child and parent. Traditionally parents taught their children so that they would grow up to be respectable, well-behaved, and successful adults. Any hiccups in this pattern were considered the fault of the insubordinate child. The father/son relationship between Bohr and Heisenberg is a ready example. With practicality and patience Bohr tries to help Heisenberg understand the way things ought to be done. A good example is that of Heisenberg's uranium experiments that were conducted with neither protection from radiation nor proper controls to prevent meltdown. For the traditional generation that Bohr represents, success gained by caution and patience is much more agreeable than the obsessive persistence characteristic of Heisenberg. The two of them don't reach an understanding. Instead they attempt to reason with each other with the assumption that one of them is wrong. Both look at the problem objectively in an effort to save their friendship, but in doing so they actually bring it more harm than good. Their inability to see their own principles at work in their lives is rather surprising. They both stress the importance of relativity, which Einstein put forth to start modern physics, but don't realize that the conflict in their relationship comes from their unwillingness to put their personal feelings aside so as to become more objective and less relative. When Bohr finally does agree to revisit the walk in the woods without storming off, a deeper layer of understanding and sympathy is created for Heisenberg and the characters come closer to resolving the issue than they were before.

Dee tries to improve her place in society as well as the status of her family, but struggles because of their unwillingness and incapacity to change. Even Mama Johnson admits that Dee “pressed [them] to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand” (*Everyday* 298). But it wasn’t just Dee doing the shoving. Mama Johnson, who was living by traditional standards refused herself to embrace the new society as Dee had. More than a simple generation gap, this incompatibility in the parent/child relationship represents the incompatibility of two different socially defined relationships that appear mutually exclusive. There is not only the refusal of one to accept the validity of the other but at times a problematic inability to understand one another. Dee is simply unable to communicate what she’s learned at college to her lower-class family.

Another changing perception in modern society is that concerning woman. Maggie represents a more traditional way of looking at women. In “Everyday Use” she is the younger sister that idolizes and envies her older sister. Her life is centered on Dee, the oldest child, even though she will never be like her sister—to whom “the world can not say no.” Maggie is submissive and quiet. When Dee announces her attention to take the blankets with her the only hint that Maggie is upset are noises coming from the kitchen. But by the time she comes out she’s resolved to take up her role again and says that Dee can have the quilts. In this example it isn’t necessarily any misunderstanding or unwillingness on Maggie’s part that keeps her from improving her situation. Instead it is the traditional role in which the author has placed her that keeps her from taking an actively defensive position against her sister. Society exhibits this same incongruity

between modern standards that are aggressively and boldly propagated and traditional standards that are more reserved and less heard.

Margrethe doesn't have the same difficulty in expressing herself because the author has patterned her after the women in modern society who follow a much different code from Maggie. Having lost some of her own children she finds it hard to accept Heisenberg as a surrogate son more than her husband does. Her own personal opinion of the young man also precludes her from being able to welcome him with open arms. She is torn between love of her husband and his love for Heisenberg, whom she thinks, may have come to Copenhagen simply to "show-off". But instead of keeping them to herself she voices and asserts her opinions. Bohr, a traditional character, is concerned about Margrethe's overt sensitivity being out of line but Margrethe stands firm in her rebuttal:

. . . everything *is* personal! . . . I'm sorry, but you want to make everything seem heroically abstract and logical. And when you tell the story, yes, it all falls into place . . . But I was there . . . and what I see isn't a story! It's confusion and rage and jealousy and tears and no one knowing what things mean or which way they're going to go. (*Copenhagen* 73)

She takes an active role in the conversation and even though Bohr and Heisenberg might assume they need to talk down to her level of understanding, she is quite able to understand when the other two do not.

Unfortunately the characters fail to understand one another and don't resolve the conflicts in their relationships because they represent the extremes of social thought. Modern and traditional literature have similar difficulty reconciling differences in their approaches as in shown in the texts they write. Whereas a century ago authors wrote

with explicit, unquestionable principles and commonly accepted consequences, much of the literature affected by ‘literary relativity’ is more willing to compromise its intended meanings. This change is not necessarily the author’s conscious decision, but more likely due to the changing codes already held in modern society. When the author creates a story he uses characters that embody the habits and roles familiar to him and the reader from modern society.

Copenhagen and “Everyday Use” show how hard it is for the two social standards to exist by including characters in their stories that have these differences. The result, unfortunately, is irresolution as Dee leaves without the blankets but the Johnsons remain without having gained from what Dee tried to teach them. The three in *Copenhagen* go through draft after draft in an attempt to find what exactly happened at that meeting without convincing themselves or anyone else that they’ve really found it. Whether due to ‘literary relativity’, unwillingness to accept new ideas, or inability to understand another’s perspective the characters are unable to find a basis upon which to resolve their conflicts. In this manner the literature shows how society has become less apt to search for commonality but to rely instead upon complementary.

This complementary is an idea proposed by Bohr that allows for two mutually exclusive theories to be coexistent. In his world of physics light that appears to behave as both a wave and a particle. Complementary in its best attempt explains this phenomenon by stating that light is particles emitted in waves. But in the modern social world it is much more difficult to reach a compromise between the opposing systems discussed in this paper. The fact that both systems exist in today’s society is attested by the characters that embrace roles from different social systems and then are thrown together in close

conversation. But in having them coexist for the duration of the story it becomes evident that such coexistence is mostly superficial. Bohr himself is unable to live the principle he developed in his own life. He is unable to continue his relationship with the younger man that comes to him as friend and enemy for very long. It is only through reminiscing about the past, in which the two were friends, that they are able to rekindle their friendship and forgive one another. But as soon as they are confronted with the present it becomes increasingly difficult for Bohr to not remember Heisenberg as an enemy. When the two go out for a walk in the woods coexistence becomes impossible and Bohr storms off and Heisenberg heads back to Germany.

“Everyday Use” is obviously not a story only concerned with whether or not Dee gets to keep the blankets that Mama Johnson promised to Maggie. Yet that is the only conflict that is resolved. In a superficial way mother and child, past and future, tradition and innovation are brought together as the two argue over the importance of the family quilts. One might tend to assume that the Mama wins, along with tradition, but Dee leaves to return to the society that knows her as Wangero. She has brought the photos of her mother, sister, and house. With the churn, dasher, and a couple of family stories she will continue to lead her life unhindered until she returns home again. Mama Johnson hasn’t fared much better. Wangero leaves her and Maggie still sitting in the yard in front of the house.

An even more important aspect of this family argument can be found in the way that the author structured its resolution. Instead of making a clear stand on either side, Mama’s decision to act and give the quilts to Maggie depends upon an external motivation. Mama Johnson recollects, “When I looked at her like that something hit me

in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of god touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never done before" (*Everyday*). It is this external force that causes Mama Johnson to act. A sudden understanding that she finally grasps or perhaps only pity for the child, but this "something" serves to define the situation clearly enough for Mama Johnson that she acts and resolves the issue.

Although this paper will not attempt to find the cause of this change in Mama Johnson it remains important because the affects made upon the character and the story. Because Mama Johnson felt this she was able to assert her stand and opinion which put her and her traditional values on a more equal level with Wangero's incessant praise of her own modern society. This is perhaps the first step into being able to coming to a common understanding between the two systems. In *Copenhagen*, Bohr is able to resolve his own unwillingness to understand Heisenberg by not walking away from him the woods during the last draft of their meeting. Margrethe shows the ability to understand concepts that she may not be wholly familiar with, which allows her husband and Heisenberg to continue their resolutions.

"Everyday Use" and *Copenhagen* are structured with only a few characters to interact with each other so the interaction between them becomes very important. In analyzing this interaction it is easy to see the struggle between them because of the social standards to which each character adheres. But they aren't able to reach in firm conclusions because they don't want to, or they don't understand how, or they don't put forth the attitude or effort required doing so. The situation is the same in modern society today. As it tries to define standards apart from tradition, society finds it extremely

difficult because of the many different perspectives. Until people in the society recognize and react, as did the characters in these two texts it is most likely that no compromise will ever be made. Instead of living by complementarity each one will storm off in the woods as had Bohr, leaving friendships, families, and blankets to an uncertain future.

Works Cited

Frayn, Michael. *Copenhagen*. New York: Random, 1998.

Walker, Alice. "*Everyday Use*".