

Contemporary Literature Portfolio

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Critical Analysis: 'dear white america'

The title of 'dear white america', a poem written by Danez Smith (2017), establishes a white American audience and generalises white Americans into one group through a letter-of-complaint like form. Directly addressing this specific group of people creates irony as white American readers would feel targeted because of their race, despite black communities actually being the targeted demographic in America's current political climate, and the ones that have been subjected to discriminatory generalisations and stereotypes for centuries. Smith purposefully makes privileged white readers feel outcasted and victimised by the generalisation in order for them to understand the prejudices that black people experience in society.

Smith uses an experimental, non-standard grammatical style by consistently using lowercase throughout the poem with the exception of the names of black people that have been overlooked by the media to highlight their importance and give them the respect they deserve. The repetitive use of the lowercase letter 'i' removes the individual connotations that a capital letter 'I' has from the first-person pronoun, representing the unheard voices of the black community and not just Smith's singular voice. The lowercase 'i' also connotes a lack of ego and self-importance, suggesting that many black people in America do not feel important or valued in their country. This contributes to the ironic tone as white people often group black people by their skin colour instead of their unique, individual qualities.

The consistent use of lowercase in conjunction with the lack of punctuation and one flow of consciousness is a stylistic choice made by Smith to illustrate the relentless, never-ending cycle of racism in American society. By opening with the lowercase 'i've', closing with no full-stop after 'ruin' at the end of the poem and not breaking the poem into stanzas, Smith creates a sense of continuity, implying that racism and police brutality against black people is cyclical and does not pause. The poem's form of one flow of consciousness causes it to be read like a passionate outburst that mimics the African American preaching style of influential figures like Martin Luther King, conveying Smith's frustration and desperation for social change. An example of this one flow of consciousness being 'because Jordan boomed. because Emmett whistled. because Huey P. spoke. because Martin preached' as it reads like an endless series of arguments against the unjust treatment of black people in America that will continue to be presented until justice is served.

Smith emphasises that racism is a contemporary issue regardless of time by listing important figures in back history and innocent victims of police brutality and radically driven hate crimes throughout history, ranging from 14-year-old 'Emmet' Till who was murdered in 1955, to co-founder of the Black Panther Party, 'Huey. P', to unarmed 'Jordan' Edwards who was shot by police in 2017. The use of names from different historical periods highlights how racism and violence towards black people has consistently been, and is still, a prevalent

issue in contemporary American society, exposing and criticising the structural, systematic racism within white American institutions such as the government and police force.

Italics are used throughout the poem to represent the additional voice of white people that make racist and ignorant statements such as *'go back to Africa'* and *'i just don't see race'* and ask ironic questions such as *'why does it always have to be about race?'*, despite their white ancestors enslaving an entire demographic of people based on their race and forcing them to America. Not only do the italics highlight the privilege white people have by being able to ignore race and face no consequences, they visually showcase the racial divides in America. Smith presents the 'black' voice, in non-italics, and the 'white' voice, in italics, as different to reflect how black voices are not heard and represented in the white-dominated society of America but white voices are overrepresented.

Creative Response (Poem) and Analysis: 'Don't Go to the Flea Circus'

*From my winter coat to this body bag,
Picked up and zipped up over my head,
I've lost all sense of up, down, left and right,
Is this really it? The end?*

*The end... our inevitable fate we feared the most,
On my way to the flea circus where Grandpa said, 'don't you go'.
Almost tasting the body-flavoured broth on the tip of my tongue, so close,
Please, please... let me go.*

*I'm sorry uncle Haratio who had been the first to go,
I'm sorry Mumma who no longer has to shiver under her coat.
I'm sorry Grandpa for wanting meat on my bones,
Bony and cold, bony and cold, bones and old clothes.*

For my creative response, I decided to write a poem from Ely's perspective during the final scene in 'Don't Go to the Flea Circus' where he is being taken to the flea circus after collapsing from starvation and exhaustion. This poem features some direct quotations of the short story, such as lines 3 and 4, as well as phrases such as 'The end', 'don't you go' and 'bones and old clothes', and are re-arranged alongside my own original writing to create a poem that reflects Ely's thought process during his final moments of life as his death approaches.

In the first stanza, I wanted to illustrate Ely's confused state of mind by presenting him as having no sense of direction as a result of being starved and exhausted but also by the disorientating and isolating nature of being in a body bag. I also incorporated the questions that Ely asks himself, on line 4, to emphasise the fear and disbelief he is feeling as he struggles to comprehend that he is dying but also his confusion and desperate need for answers as to what is happening to him.

Ely realises that his death is near in the second stanza and becomes desperate to find a way to survive, demonstrated by his begging to go to the flea circus so he can finally eat. I wanted to explore the theme of morality versus survival that is prevalent throughout 'Don't Go to the Flea Circus' by portraying Ely as craving or almost drooling over the thought of eating human soup to convey how humans will do anything to survive, regardless of how moral it is, exploring how living in such a dystopian society can cause people to completely disregard their morals and beliefs in order to live.

In the third stanza, I present Ely to be repetitively apologising to his family members that have unfortunately died before him to convey his guilt for not fulfilling his desire to become 'The Last Survivor' that he subtly hints at throughout the story. Ely's character is the epitome of desperation and acts as a microcosm of our society where people want to create social change, such as poverty and climate change, but do not have the power to do so due to unjust capitalist power dynamics and therefore feel guilty for being unable to do anything.

The repetition of 'bony and cold' and ending the poem with 'bones and old clothes' is meant to illustrate the moment Ely passes away. Throughout the story, Ely, and everyone around him, is characterised as bony and cold due to their poor living conditions and the repetition of this phrase emphasises how the starve was relentless and seemed to never end. I chose to close the poem with the phrase 'bones and old clothes' as it references Ely's conversation with Mr Henry where they discuss what happens when there's no longer anyone left to eat because everyone had died, implying that in that moment, Ely has also died and is now just bones and old clothes.

Critical Analysis: 'Far Away'

'Far Away', a dystopian play written by Caryl Churchill, uses The Theatre of Cruelty, a form of theatre conceptualised by dramatist Antonin Artaud, to expose the cruelties of modern-day life and make sense of the brutalities we face. In Act One, we see Harper gaslight her niece, Joan, into believing Joan 'can't sleep' because of the 'strange bed', despite Joan claiming to 'like different places'. Harper uses her dominance in their relationship to convince Joan into thinking that the adults and children her uncle was 'pushing' and 'hitting' with a 'metal stick' deserved this treatment because they were 'traitors' that attacked her uncle first, manipulating her original perceptions by forcing the established xenophobic political idea that Joan is on the side making things better onto her while she is still young and impressionable. This is an example of how Harper makes sense of the brutalities that Joan has witnessed for her, as well as for the audience who are likely to be asking the same questions as Joan from a non-indoctrinated perspective but are ultimately limited to only Harper's manipulative narrative. The audience can apply this concept to their real lives; an example being President Trump building a wall to keep out immigrants that are 'invading' and 'taking from' America, highlighting the cruelty of politics as well as theatre.

Due to the gaslighting that young children were subjected to in the dystopian society in 'Far Away', Joan and Todd do not seem disturbed by studying such an unusual subject as 'hat' at college and making hats for prisoners to wear before they're executed by the state. Their

normalisation to the horrific mass murder of prisoners becomes particularly prevalent when their CEO decides to 'bump up' their deadlines and Todd and Joan are only concerned about finishing the hats on time, disregarding the fact that more and more people are about to be killed. Joan even confesses that she thinks it 'seems sad' to burn the hats 'with the bodies', with Todd responding that he thinks that's 'the joy of it' as the 'hats are ephemeral', demonstrating how the creative process of making hats is a happy and colourful distraction for Joan and Todd from the real brutalities of their dystopian society and the ephemeral nature of the prisoner's lives that the hats overshadow. The hats are focused on and celebrated to ensure that people continue to conform because when society are convinced that they are contributing to something beautiful, there is no reason for them to stop.

Throughout the final act, Churchill explores the theme of siloing and how society alienates those who are not complicit in their beliefs and ultimately turns against them. Due to gaslighting, xenophobia and now alienation, Joan has become so paranoid that she cannot trust anyone in her closing monologue and even fears intangible objects such as gravity. Society has become so divided at this point in the play that Canadians are compared to 'mosquitoes', emphasising the xenophobic mindset that other cultures are as welcome as pests, and everyone is strictly categorised to their own alienated space like the 'Lavian dentists' and 'Thai butchers' that Joan seems to dislike. Joan describes the sight of 'rats bleeding from their mouths' as 'good' and casually states that she has 'killed two cats' and a 'child under five', conveying how completely desensitised and unempathetic people have become due to these xenophobic divisions. The characters have become dehumanised, placing more importance on hats than each other. Churchill could be criticising the society of the audience here, emphasising how if we continue to isolate each other because of our own agendas and ignore the real issues that affect us all like climate change, for example, we will also become an alienated, fear-driven, dystopian society.

Critical Analysis/Overview: *The Vegetarian*

The Vegetarian, a novel written by Korean writer Han Kang, explores the idea of The Feminist Killjoy (Ahmed, S. 2010) through the characterisation of protagonist Yeong-hye: a predominantly silent and mysterious character that one day refuses to eat meat after having a 'dream' that consisted of bloody, animalistic imagery. Her decision to cut meat and all animal products out of her diet is met with confusion, frustration and aggression from her family members and from then on is treated as a 'problem' or 'distortion' to the norm, Ahmed suggesting feminists are treated as such. Yeong-hye's patriarchal and self-entitled husband, Mr Cheong, labels her as 'unreasonable' and 'selfish' for throwing away the meat in their house and not handing him his belongings before he leaves for work, further treating her as a disruption to his life for making her own decisions as an individual that is clear in the novel he is not used to.

The first chapter is from Mr Cheong's perspective and is the only chapter narrated in first-person, immediately establishing his egotistical, self-centred mindset. He reveals that he married Yeong-hye because she was 'completely unremarkable in every way' and didn't want to deal with a woman with intelligence, good looks or wealth. Mr Cheong turns positive female qualities into disruptions here due to his patriarchal inferiority complex of

having a small penis and a 'paunch' that started to appear in his mid-twenties. He perceived Yeong-hye as passive and knew she wouldn't complain about being unsatisfied or him being unattractive, and therefore married her to live a peaceful life that centred around his work, objectifying her. Yeong-hye's refusals to eat meat, however, begin to disrupt his career as she becomes not only the feminist killjoy, but the killjoy at the capitalist and patriarchal dinner table. Mr Cheong's colleagues criticise and ridicule her vegetarianism as if she's not present, claiming they're glad they've never sat down with a 'proper vegetarian' or eaten a meal with someone 'who thinks meat is repulsive', yet he does not defend her in order to maintain his status at work.

The concept of carno-phallogocentrism and the sexual politics of meat is navigated throughout *The Vegetarian* as the male figures in Yeong-hye's life all seem to objectify her and act as her dominant, male subject. For example, Mr Cheong repeatedly rapes her for his own sexual needs despite her resisting, her father forcefully pushes meat into her mouth against her will which can be interpreted as a crude, metaphorical rape, and her brother-in-law takes advantage of her when mentally ill to have sex with her to satisfy his fantasies about Yeong-hye. Yeong-hye, as a woman, is deconstructed into body parts throughout the novel, the most prevailing example being her brother-in-law's obsession with her Mongolian mark on her left buttock and is treated and arguably consumed like a piece of meat.

As the novel progresses, Yeong-hye's desire to become something akin to a plant increases as she stops eating completely and only accepts water, presses her naked body against windows in order to photosynthesise, and hopes for her words and thoughts to soon 'disappear' in order to become a tree. Yeong-hye's character is perceived as utterly absurd at first, however, it becomes clear that Yeong-hye is a force for change. It can be interpreted that her consistent refusals to eat meat and conform to expectations of women in South Korea were an attempt to become unrapable, uncontrollable, and ultimately untouchable by her male subjects. Yeong-hye subverts the idea that 'feminism' is placing yourself 'outside' of happiness (Ahmed, S. 2010) as she goes through this transformation to liberate herself, and for herself only.

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