

A STREETCAR NAMED THEORY: THE KALEIDOSCOPE OF THE ROAD OF LIFE

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Theory gives us the thinking tools for carving a text for deep meanings with the eye and skills of an archaeologist. This process unveils a kaleidoscope of perspectives in the end. The content of a literary piece is not the quintessential part. Instead, the process of analyzing and dissecting a text through multiple lenses holds the most importance. Another approach is through understanding the literary text as the mold: the tools employed to carve the mold of its meanings make the difference in the end result, whether it involves choosing certain quotes or omitting certain aspects of a text. The most striking aspect of theory was that it enabled me to become aware of the ways in which humans are mentally programmed through various influences. I am now able to apply this awareness to any text I encounter, as well as in my life, family, and with friends. I am mostly drawn to Marxist, Feminist, Psychoanalytical, and Panopticism theories as I believe they are the crucial theories through which I can decipher the meaningful ways in which we are mentally and socially programmed to behave. However, I did not find Queer theory as useful and interesting as I was, yet again, socially programmed in my native country to resist it.

Marxism is one of the theories that drew my attention as it helps me better understand why I had always been so determined to come to the United States and become a successful litigator. Not only this, but it also made me understand what fuels the ideology of rugged individualism and the American Dream. This ideology is a way of being now. According to Lois Tyson, “our *subjectivity*, or selfhood, is shaped by and shapes the culture into which we are born” (284). There is no ideology, or discourse as Tyson refers to it, that is more powerful and as pervasive as the idea of the self-made man within the Marxist theory. We encounter it everywhere: books, magazines, TV, whether we are in the U.S. or not. According to Tyson, “it is through these discourses circulating in our culture that our individual identities are

formed, are linked to one another, and re-linked to the culture that both shapes and is shaped by each of us” (311). All you need is character and hard work, and you can achieve anything you want. That is the belief behind rugged individualism, or the ideology of the self-made man. The stories told to us as kids fascinate and motivate us: no matter what our present status quo is, as long as we put in the effort and behave appropriately, nothing can stand in our way. However, Tyson argues that is not really the case. Many facts are ignored by this ideology: while it is true that there are many individuals that have succeeded impressively career-wise, made fortunes, and started with nothing, there are millions out there who have followed the “recipe of success” and progressed little, if at all. The power is within us, we believe. Or so we are told through this ideology that functions as a shallow veil over our eyes.

Tyson uses *The Great Gatsby* to illustrate the underpinnings of the self-made man realities. Even though Gatsby became wealthy from nothing, he used illegal means to achieve it. Without his money laundering activities, Gatsby would not have obtained all his properties and money or, at least, not as much, nor as quick. However, does this idea of the self-made man create tendencies of accumulating wealth as the main purpose of life? Is it simply getting rid of frustration and compensating for things that one could not have bought in their younger years? Or does it nurture good character traits, such as ambition, perseverance, competitiveness, hard work, and strong ethics as we tend to believe? These are important questions that I have neglected to raise or even be aware of before I encountered Marxist theory. I now have the power to better understand and avoid the pitfalls of the ideology of rugged individualism. Many times, we hear the expression “Don’t forget where you came from” when one pursues this road of success towards individualistic accomplishment. However, this is merely an effort to maintain a shallow veil over what truly happens when one achieves that type of wealth and fame from nothing: forgetting your roots, repressing where you came from, or, at best, creating the illusion of how poverty and suffering were essential towards ultimate success.

All in all, the American Dream is somewhat as a fairy tale that anyone would love to hear: powering through near starvation, working three jobs to pay for schooling, working at night and studying during the day. The harder it was to get to the top, the more we believe it is worth achieving in the end.

Tyson states that the main fault in this ideology is the desire, and even need one might argue, to “transcend the historical realities of time, place, and human limitation” in order to be able to achieve such success (306). Thus, just as Gatsby denied his origins and modified his past, one usually needs to pay a similar extensive price to achieve such greatness. The fulfillment of the American Dream cannot entirely rely on strong character as we are made to believe. If that would have been the case, why would have Gatsby needed to employ illegal means, which were vital towards the accumulation of his wealth? I used to consider the desire for achieving the American Dream as something intrinsic, transcendent, an abstract call. However, this theory enabled me to have a deeper understanding on how people around the world, including myself, or characters such as Gatsby, were mentally and socially programmed to understand and seek success in the American way. Marxism is a theory that has opened my eyes to how numerous people are touched by and driven to follow the American Dream and the road to success.

Whereas Marxism concerns how society programs us within the social class context, Feminism is a theory that concerns the unequal gender construct. Contrary to its name, this theory concerns both women and men as both genders are quintessential towards understanding the implications and forces behind this unequal social construct. Feminist theory has enabled me to see how not only women, but also men have been mentally and socially programmed to see themselves in a certain way due to their gender construct. At first, I did not consider myself a feminist, nor desired to be associated with this movement as my assumption was that feminists believe that they are better than men, and thus, create yet another unequal social arena. I developed this assumption in Romania, where I was mentally programmed by the pervasive patriarchal society to believe as such. According to Tyson, “many of us who are new to the study of feminist theory, both male and female, have decided ahead of time that we are not feminists because we don’t share whatever feminist point of view we have found the most objectionable” (83). It makes perfect logical sense for why men would try to make feminists appear as unappealing: as long as men keep feminists at bay and don’t let this movement gather many supporters, their patriarchy is safe. For example, Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* portrays women as the darkness, while men would be the light. Throughout the book, women are literally and figuratively silenced and kept in their

own world. Marlow, the narrator, remarks, “They-the women I mean-are out of it-should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse.” (63). Marlow shows how women are kept out of the men’s sphere of power, domination, and opportunities. Marlow invokes “protection”, implying that women could not cope or survive in their world. However, as several theories teach us to challenge readings, we notice how, in fact, Marlow’s concept of protection is false, because as long as women stay in a world of their own, they can never be participants in the sphere of men.

Therefore, women do not know that they are in fact capable, but denied this ability: not by nature, but by men. Another instance in which the illustration of women is clearly sexist is when Marlow notices a sketch [...] representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch” (40). This is a vivid image that shows the woman having the light towards the way, hence the power to be extremely useful to society; however, she is blindfolded due to social programming, thus made unaware of this.

Another way in which theory enabled me to detect sexism in texts is through the binary quality of language. For instance, Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* uses the power of binary language and its implications, such as light/darkness, masculine/feminine and active/passive to portray men as superior over women in every regard. As we have learned from other theories and theorists, language is merely an invented tool used towards *separating* and *creating* meanings behind things and people. According to Johanna M. Smith, “a discourse is a ‘domain of language-use’ [...] it is a set of practices that construct the object of which they speak” (190). Thus, we can see how this binary system of constructing language is to the advantage of men and disadvantage of women, as men use this powerful tool towards assigning gender roles. “For example, we use the negative word *slut* to describe a woman who sleeps with a number of men while we use the positive word *stud* to describe a man who sleeps with a number of women” states Tyson (91). The man is glorified by these actions and cheered by his friends, whereas the woman is put down for expressing her sexuality. Language is a powerful tool used towards dwarfing women, glorifying men, and segregating them. As we have learned in this class numerous instances, language speaks us, and unfortunately, the way language is set, it mostly speaks men in a favorable light and undermines women, or secludes them altogether. We then begin to think in this manner automatically about ourselves and the

people around us. As Tyson states, “women live in a world in which virtually all meaning has been defined by patriarchal language” (101). I became a feminist because I realized that, since I was a child, I was exposed to the patriarchal way of thinking, resulting in the kind of assumptions wanted by men. I had slowly been mentally trained, through the pervasive power of language especially, to see the world as divided in two: the masculine gender attributed to the positive side of the binary system, whereas women are associated with the negative side. Critical feminist theory enabled me to make connections among various theories concerning language and its bias construction. It has also made me aware of the way in which women and men altogether can be socially programmed to think a certain way and why a high degree of awareness needs to be maintained when reading texts.

I understand literary texts based on my assumptions and beliefs, the result of how I was brought up. For instance, being raised as Christian, I am conservative and judgmental when I analyze characters that have gay tendencies. The values and beliefs instilled by society and parents determine the way we react towards issues or behaviors. This led to much less interest in Gay, Lesbian, and Queer criticism than in Marxist, Feminist, and Psychoanalytical theories. Thus, I did not immediately make a note of it, when, for example, I read *The Great Gatsby*. One of the first quotes that is highlighted by queer theory to display Nick’s queer tendencies towards Gatsby is, “If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him” (2). Initially, I did not assume Nick could potentially be gay because I was not mentally trained to see such tendencies or interpret them under this light. Having said that, it does not mean that this theory has not helped me become more open- minded and tolerant. It simply serves to point out the role my assumptions and upbringing play in what theory means to me and how I am not naturally drawn towards using this theory to search and decipher meanings. I do not consider that a character or person’s sexual orientation is vital towards understanding their core. This would be different for someone raised in the U.S., where homosexuality is pervasive and more openly discussed. This aspect further shows how social and mental programming work towards embedding assumptions and manipulating the way one sees theory and the world. Whereas I had my suspicions regarding Irene’s gay tendencies towards Clare after encountering Queer theory, I was more

drawn to the possibility of a repressed desire for Clare. This would have been unacceptable at that time, as Deborah E. McDowell argues in the beginning of her essay “It’s not Safe. Not safe at all” (616-618). The issue of repression leads me into my favorite theory, the one I mentally employ initially to every text: psychoanalysis.

As I was reflecting on the critical credo that I initially wrote, I realized that even then I was focused on aspects of psychoanalysis. I asked myself why and I understood that, due to certain traumas that had occurred during my childhood and teenage years, I am thoroughly interested in grasping and applying psychoanalytical principles to my life as I believe that who I am has been greatly influenced by certain circumstances and core issues that are extensively discussed in psychoanalysis. This is due to being raised in a house where both my parents are deeply involved in the law and have taught me to analyze situations and people in a meticulous, psychoanalytical lens (similar to analyzing a law case). By grasping these core issues,, I not only hope to understand every character and person on a deep level, but also be able to guide myself towards learning how to cope or even solve my core issues. This theory has helped me gain great insight into my behavior and the vicious circles in which I’ve been through in my relationships, due to my Oedipal complex. According to Tyson, “When we look at the world through a psychoanalytic lens, we see that it is composed of individual human beings, each with a psychological history that begins in childhood experiences in that family and each with patterns of adolescent and adult behavior that are the direct result of that early experience” (12). I find it fascinating to be able to track the journey of a character, collect information on their childhood, and try to identify core issues and the reason behind why they act a certain way. For instance, in *The Great Gatsby*, I was asking myself at some points in the book: *Why is there no mention of his mother? Why is he so obsessed with Daisy?* This led me to use one of the tools that psychoanalysis offered me and I diagnosed Gatsby as having an Oedipal complex. One would assume that, if Gatsby had a healthy relationship with his mother, he would have at least mentioned her. Not the case in this novel, and thus, under this psychoanalytic lens, I believe that the huge void created by the lack of his mother needed to be filled by marrying Daisy. This is not the only instance where Gatsby’s family and past status quo comes into question regarding psychoanalysis:

repression, one of the most important psychoanalytical concepts, also plays deeply in this novel. Gatsby represses his true family background and replaces it with something else: “I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition” (65). Throughout the novel, we notice that Gatsby’s parents are not dead (well, in his mother’s case we do not know), or wealthy. The questions and information necessary for collecting psychoanalytical aspects are extensive, but fascinating: certain desires, family issues, childhood background, parental relationship and dynamics, traumas, and more. Most of all, I think I am drawn to what insights psychoanalysis yields for me as it not only provides a holistic look into the matter of a person, and not just who that person’s personality or identity is in the time of the novel, but also forces readers to consider things from the beginning of a character’s life until that point, which a lot of theories do not put the accent on.

Further, another interesting psychoanalytical theory that caught my attention was Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage. In “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience”, Jacques Lacan argues that “[t]he mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality” (60). In other words, as Lois Tyson has pointed out as well, in the *mirror stage*, after primarily experiencing a delightful inner and physical fulfillment, we later become aware that we are not complete and, from there, we seek a feeling of wholeness, which, alas, can never be really found again (27-28). This theory fascinates me in that, every person, without being able to control this, has experienced this, so the consequences of this stage can be noticed in every person or character. For example, in *Passing*, Clare is fervently seeking that feeling of wholeness through being part of both cultures and races; however, that cannot be achieved. Either way she proceeds, Clare will lose something in the process and thus, will experience the same feeling of incompleteness that she felt since the *mirror stage*. The same is true of Irene, who seeks the feeling of wholeness in her family and in controlling her loved ones. This theory has not just made me understand Clare and Irene’s fervent desire for completeness, but has also

provided me with insight into a plausible reason for why we all seek the feeling of wholeness, whether it is through a love partner, wealth, career, education and more. This theory pointed revealed why we never seem to truly find something that gives us the feeling of plenitude with ourselves: even though we might think certain things would, once we get them, we are disappointed in realizing that we have just slightly added to our happiness, but have not, yet again, achieved the feeling of completeness. Desire breeds desire.

An aspect that I particularly am drawn to about theory is its vast and insightful applicability power to any text. It is far from being useful in the limited amount of texts required in this class. For example, in my Understanding Drama class, I was better able to understand plays such as *Fences*, *Tartuffe*, *Oedipus*, *The Rover*, *Trifles* through Feminist and Psychoanalytical lenses, for instance. In *The Rover*, *Trifles*, and *Tartuffe*, women are portrayed as inferior commodities, incapable of being able to get involved in serious affairs in life, such as the murder investigation that takes place in *Trifles*. In *Fences* and *Oedipus*, I was able to apply psychoanalytical theories such as the Oedipal complex, repression, and projection in order to better understand the father's unhealthy behavior towards his son and, of course, the roots and effects of the Oedipal complex in *Oedipus*. For instance, Troy, the main character in *Fences*, recalls how he was scared of his father. However, he is unaware of how he is repressing memories that relate to his core issues as, several times, the characters would tell him that he keeps changing stories, and projecting the fear he had of his father and hatred on his son, Cory. These principles can also be applied in real life, which gives the usefulness and applicability of theory a whole new dimension. For example, by applying the principles of the Oedipal complex, repression, low self-esteem, fear of intimacy, and projection, I understood why my best friend is a pathological liar: her father had not given her any affection growing up, and she is now trying to not only impress her father, but everyone else, through every means possible. Her father is the root of her unhealthy behavior and understanding this has made me grow up in the approach to issues that affect me. As a future attorney, I appreciate the way in which theory has taught me to be able to see an issue from many angles, and instead of judging and jumping to conclusions, understand the reasons behind why certain characters and people are a certain way.

Moreover, Foucault's theory on panopticism has an intriguing, yet extremely effective applicability towards understanding the dangers and forces behind the most popular social networking site in the world: Facebook. The following quote is one of the most readily applicable and insightful regarding Facebook as a great influence and peril in our lives as per our privacy and identity:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power of relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. By this very fact, the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to be non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound, and permanent are its effects; it is a perpetual victory that avoids any physical confrontation and which is always decided in advance (183).

While Facebook does not charge you monetarily for creating a profile or using it in general, it does charge you with a lot more: *your loss of privacy and voluntary submission to power*. Just as Foucault mentions, while we are the ones in charge of slowly losing this privacy for the sake of being part of society, we are playing a double role in that we allow ourselves to be visible to power *voluntarily*. As Bentham notices, “there were no more bars, no more chains, no more heavy locks” (183). Facebook is free territory, where you have the opportunity to start from scratch. Or, better said, Facebook is “a design of subtle coercion” as we feel the need to create a new identity that is easier to fulfill through this virtual lens (188). Referring back to Foucault's insights, we can understand the ways in which we have greatly *facilitated* the offering of information to anyone who is interested in our identity. For instance, there has been a case in the U.S. where a teacher was fired as the principal had seen that her new FB profile picture showed her wearing a shirt stating ‘drunken pirate’. Foucault was right in stating that the external power does not even have to move one finger, so to speak, for it to have control over our lives. Here, the teacher had herself posted the

compromising picture that took one second for the principle to notice, without any advanced or costly background checks needed. This, and other multiple examples of how police have used Facebook to track possible future or present criminal activities, helps us understand the connection between this system and how it still functions as a punishment tool, even though Facebook does not seem dangerous. And that is precisely the point behind this system, as Foucault describes it: the appearance of safety which in turn leads to our voluntary submission to serve external powers. According to Foucault, this system works “because it can reduce the number of those who exercise it, while increasing the number of those on whom it is exercised. Because it is possible to intervene at any moment and because the constant pressure acts even before the offences, mistakes or crimes have been committed” (185). Facebook is a perfect example to portray this concept of panopticism: there are nearly a billion active users of Facebook around the world, and that number is continually increasing. Thus, one seventh of the population is *actively* under the radar of Facebook. External powers can, without many resources needed, control society, while giving it the impression that everyone is in control of their own privacy and life. This analysis and application of Foucault’s theory to something so popular and vital in our everyday life is the reason for why I believe that theory helps us become aware of not only the implications and factors that trigger and facilitate such behavior and programming in the characters in a book, but also in our own lives.

Literature is a creative, vast compilation of records depicting the essence and patterns of human experience and behavior that can be a very important cultural diplomacy tool. I believe that literature constitutes an inviting window with a view towards the ocean of life, with its simplicity and peacefulness or restlessness at times. We cannot hope to grasp the beauty, complexity, changes, and factors in this ocean of life unless we are willing to boldly delve deep into it, eager to fully employ our mental abilities and literary tools to discover the meanings, purpose, and wonders behind it all. It is a demanding process. However, as we find the keys towards understanding each text and open each life door, one by one, we see that it is absolutely worthwhile. Ultimately, I see theory as providing us the means to see the beauty and complexity behind each issue, character, and even our own lives. Tyson states that, “it seems unavoidable, and part of the paradox of seeing and learning is that in order to understand some things

clearly and ignores others, just as the close-up camera crystallizes whatever it frames and renders the rest a blurred background” (3). Thus, our mind functions similar to a telescope, with dozens of lens that sees this kaleidoscope of perspectives that we encounter in life. When one thinks of these theories as mental lens, we see how they each purposefully focus on certain aspects of a book. In this process though, we lose focus of some aspects, and thus, while we can hope to get close to the core of certain sections of a core, we cannot hope to grasp everything. However, by having this array of theories in mind, we can build connections amongst them, and by being aware of all of them, we can have a richer, more complex understanding of a text than was possible before. Thus, by embarking in this streetcar named theory, I can travel around every alley, street, and freeway of life, which takes my understanding of the world on a whole new level.

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