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Critical Essay

Throughout history, the practice of literary theory became more and more urgent due to the fact that everyone was trying to make it as a writer. With that came more critics and theorists. Throughout the 19th and 20th century literary uprising brought different forms of genre, considerations of new sense of intellectual history, moral code, social challenges, and how we humans interpret meaning. With this wave of literary comprehension that washed in, we still can ask ourselves: What is literature? How do we understand it? With many kinds of theorists practicing and perfecting their perspective theories, we may finally be able to answer some of these lingering questions.

Nowadays, there are many different theories that could be applied to any certain number of texts. These literary theories may piggyback off of each other, but they all bring a unique method of comprehension and perspective to the table. "The 57 Bus" by Dashka Slater is a text that can be analyzed through the lens of multiple theories. "The 57 Bus" can be examined through the literary criticism lens of gender studies and African American race theory with hopes to analyze and explain the main characters perception of who "they" are (Sasha, an agender teen who doesn't subscribe to any one gender) and a troubled teen who has the constructs of society already pressing against him (Richard). From the beginning, Richard knew he had to work hard to achieve any sort of personal goals in life, especially being raised in the bad area of Oakland, California. This book illuminates African American criticism because of the struggles and

challenges he has had to face growing up a minority. Sasha's story comes through the lens of gender studies criticism and it examines how sexual identity can influence the creation and perception of written works through the ideologies of patriarchal systems. The two protagonists have very different experiences with class, race, and gender. Daska Salter brings out the traditional essence of both these profound theories in order to shine light and comfort for minorities and people with gender identity issues to feel comfortable in their own skin.

“Because I'm going to make you understand the family motto: Never let your obstacles become more important than your goal” (Slater 49). In order to apply a theory to examine “The 57 Bus” we must understand the characters. First, there is Sasha. As mentioned above, Sasha doesn't conform to a gender therefore, Slater can't use the typical style pronouns like “she” or “her”, so Slater effectively stayed in the 3rd person narrative, which brought an interesting complexity to the story. The two characters have their own societal and personal binaries that work to make them more personable, relatable, also stereotyped. We tend to split things into female and male, which means people like Sasha don't have room to fit into the unwritten code of societal norms.

In *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Lois Tyson delves deeper into the idea of gender studies and how it has become a very important domain of theoretical inquiry and a platform for political activists. Tyson presents the question. What constitutes as a gender studies text and how do we adjust our thinking socially to make up for this binary? Tyson also mentions, “These people are problematized in very productive ways when lesbian critics take into account both the limitations imposed on their viewpoints by their class origins and race, and the beauty and importance of the complex heritage bestowed on all of us by the ultimate inseparability of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in our daily lives” (309). There are still many people

who are extremely old fashioned and trying to think differently about gender identity is challenging. Sasha's life story demonstrates the perception of the public eye toward the LGBTQ community, the various terms and cultures of the growing community, and the beauty of how diverse and different the world truly is. This theory connects with Sasha's character very well because it exemplifies Sasha's every decision in life because being an agender teen affects your daily life in many complex ways that test the normal constructs of society. With that comes criticism, judgement, and ostracized perception of your morals and background.

A very interesting point to examine from the book is the use of different pronouns that Slater uses to describe Sasha. There are people that struggle with the idea of conflicting notions to be agender but not know if they want to be perceived as a "he" or "her". Part of discussing the theory of gender studies is dissecting the components and nature of gender inclusive pronouns. Matt Huston, accredited author and writer for a scholarly magazine called *Psychology Today*, writes, "They may adopt gender-ambiguous names, request the use of a neutral pronoun like ze or they in place of he or she, and cultivate wardrobes and appearances that do not register neatly as male or female." Nowadays there is a much better support system for people that have these issues and are apart of LGBTQ community because they are growing in numbers so there are more facts to analyze to learn more about the difficulties of daily task, treatment from public, and who they see when they look in the mirror. Huston draws on the essence of gender studies criticism by explaining more of the science and psychology that encompasses the theory. Sasha was very aware and curious of what made "ze" like this and what could Sasha do to create a better life that involved little judgement from everyone that looked. This part stood out because this is one of the few parts where Slater addressed the readers personally to make sure the reader knows what she means. "People who identify as nonbinary are increasingly recognized within

the larger transgender world. They chronicle their intellectual and physical journeys, tackle semantic questions, and connect with others who transcending gender norms” (Huston).

Richard’s character can be analyzed through the theoretical lens of African American criticism or critical race theory. Both Richard and Sasha are compelling and relatable characters and the both allow the reader to see what happens when the status quo is challenged. Some themes of the book are intertwined with this important theory because Richard is a black teen. Key themes that are apparent with Richard’s story is bullying, class privileges, racial oppression, and the inadequacies of the juvenile justice system. Richard made a series of bad decisions in the book and one was to light Sasha’s skirt on fire while she was sleeping on the 57-bus coming home from school. He was trialed as an adult because of this malicious act. Just like Critical Race scholars, Richard has many questions about his stance on society and how to personally understand how victims of systemic racism are affected by cultural perceptions of race and how they are to represent themselves to counter prejudice in today’s biased society.

This comes from an informative article from Purdue University on critical race theory,

“As we can see, adopting a CRT approach to literature or other modes of cultural expression includes much more than simply identifying race, racism, and racialized characters in fictional works. Rather, it (broadly) emphasizes the importance of examining and attempting to understand the socio-cultural forces that shape how we and others perceive, experience, and respond to racism.”

This is a good example of why we use this approach and how important it really is. This piece answers some of the questions that Richard was asking himself. Why was he tried as an adult? How can we change the perception of oppression? Prize winning author, Michael Harriot

sheds some light on why more and more black teens are being tried as an adult and not a rightful teen.

“Forty-seven percent of the youth transferred from juvenile courts to adult courts are black, despite the fact that black children make up approximately 14 percent of the total youth population. The report highlights the enduring inequalities in America’s criminal justice system, specifically the fact that black children and children of color are routinely tried, sentenced and incarcerated as adults, often as young as 14 years old” (Harriot).

Richard made a bad decision and one that he regretted for the rest of his life. But when put into the hands of the justice system, a black teen in a bad neighborhood, he never stood a chance.

The oppositions of binaries are drawn out in this story because of the largely dissimilar characters that we encounter. Richard and Sasha are both examples of this because they bring completely different knowledge, stereotypes, and perceptions to make the narrative complex and relatable. “The 57 Bus” exposes these binaries. Racism still plays a grave roll today. Dr. Herron from Harvard University says this in conjunction with racism in America, “Race or racial ideology runs deep in our history and culture. In certain ways, it's at the core of our political culture. Our identities are shaped by race. So, given its centrality in our history, it's not surprising that it continues to be relevant.” Both these characters are fighting to figure out who they are as people and how their lives fit into this world. Their lives can be judged and explained through the theoretical lens of gender studies and race theory. “These pseudo-scientific forms of racism purported to show that there were natural, biological differences between human groups” (Herron).

Theoretical lens is used to pick apart the constructs of literature to provide the underlying meanings of the systematic nature of text. Gender studies criticism and African American race theory were both used to dissect “The 57 Bus” to its core principles. If we continue to use the tools of critical theory, we may be finally able to answer the question. What truly is literature?



Sasha before the tragedy on the bus.

Works Cited

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