

Jaroslav Kusnír (Ed.)

**Ideology and Aesthetics in American
Literature and Arts**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Ideology and Aesthetics in Literature.....	7
--	---

PART I

EARLY GENRES, POETRY AND THEORIES

I.1	<i>John Stauffer</i>	
	Frederick Douglass — Aesthetics, Ideology, and the Problem of Freedom	21
I.2	<i>Obododimma Oha</i>	
	In Lucifer We Trust: Reading William Blake's Reading of America's Mythical History.....	51
I.3	<i>Anton Pokrivčák</i>	
	Ontological as Aesthetic in Emily Dickinson's Poetry.....	69

PART II

POSTMODERN FICTION AND FILM

II.1	<i>Cristina Garrigós</i>	
	Multicultural Postmodernism: Ethics and Aesthetics	81
II. 2	<i>Pi-hua Ni</i>	
	Pen(is) in John Barth's Fiction: From Androcentric to Androgynous Narrative Paradigm.....	95
II.3	<i>Michal Peprník</i>	
	The Late (Postmodern) Mohican: From the Spectacle of Revenge to a Show	127

PART III

DRAMA AND MUSIC

III.I	<i>Zoe Detsi-Diamanti</i>	
	Visions of <i>Blackness</i> : Ideology and the <i>Other</i> in George L. Aiken's <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> (1853) and Dion Boucicault's <i>The Octoroon</i> (1859)	145

III.2 *Csaba Csapó*

Ideology behind the Aesthetic: The Relationship Between Language Use, Political Correctness and Sexual Harassment in <i>Oleanna</i> by David Mamet	171
--	-----

III.3 *Wojciech Kallas*

Us and Them: The Ambivalence of Ideology in Public Enemy's Rap Songs	185
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NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS	199
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INTRODUCTION

Ideology and Aesthetics in Literature

Jaroslav Kušnír

Many contemporary theories (some feminist and post-colonial theories, Marxism) emphasize ideological rather than artistic, literary and aesthetic values of literary texts. According to Richard Levin,

“‘ideology’ refers to a consciously held set of beliefs or creed, usually in the social or political realm. In this sense ideological approach to Shakespeare would be one that is deliberately constructed from such a creed in order to serve it, and the two most important examples today are Marxist and feminist criticism” (Levin 1996: 138).

As can be seen from this extract, the ideological approach to literary texts is not interested in their intrinsic aesthetic and literary quality, uniqueness of style or poetics, or in the way these refer to particular social reality, but in the way ideology is expressed regardless the aesthetic value of the signifier. Thus it follows that a work of art is important only to the extent it expresses certain ideological views, class or racial conflict as manifestations of these positions. From the perspective of these theories, a literary work is not always understood and researched in its entirety as a phenomenon able to convey human experience through the authors' use of original style, narrative techniques and, more generally, artistic “language.” The focus of critics and theorists defending ideologically and sociologically biased theories, as indicated above, is often restricted to analysis of fashionable terms and phenomena such as race, gender, class or ethnicity. A literary work is thus understood as a cultural, sociological or politological document equal to any other “discourses”. In such an understanding, it loses its specificity as an artistic and aesthetic artifact bearing unique features, that is the features that are able to express a unique vision of the world specific for particular cultures, gender, class or ethnic identities. Each literary work represents an outer, physical reality and experience through the specific use of the signifier, the “language” which is different from the language of sociological, legal

or any other documents. Early in the 20th century, despite their overestimation of literary language, the Formalists, and the New Critics later, identified a uniqueness and specificity of literary language finding it different from any other languages, styles and discourses. This approach focusing on the analysis of the language and narrative strategies of a literary work seems to be relevant for understanding of the nature of literature, since whatever different literary theories and approaches to the literary text may claim, it is evident that literary text refers to outer reality through specific use of language. That is why the study of this language, its reference to reality and its creation of meaning can provide us, along with the study of particular social and historical contexts, with the understanding of the creation of meaning related to particular social and cultural contexts. Thus the understanding of a literary text and its relation to external reality requires understanding of the literary language used by particular authors to convey a message about external, physical experience and the social world. Language becomes a tool and a bridge by means of which authors try to overcome barriers and distance between the perception of the world and its representation, between language and reality, between the mental process of association of ideas and the materiality of language representing it. As Charles Newman argues,

“Language is ‘given’, a phenomenon which is neither autonomous ‘nor’ coextensive with our lives. And literature, thus, is a gift— not the property of a class or even an individual prophet— a present, which, like all exemplary endowments, creates its own terms of acceptance” (Newman 1985: 97).

And Newman further continues that

“[...]we should recall that fiction always exists in a double sense: as reports on changing patterns of human behaviour, as well as on the evolution of forms[...]Literature is not a religion, or philosophy, or psychology, it is not a political act, or intrinsically virtuous, neither weapon nor sanctuary; least of all is it therapy” (96-97).

Ideological, politological, and sociological study of a literary work means a study of the objects of physical reality and social relationships,

that is of the signified rather than a signifier, during the process of which language loses the uniqueness of its aesthetic function. With such an approach, language is understood as a clear, rational but unimportant mediator of the external world corresponding almost to physical reality, and rather a mechanic tool transferring the data through language. In other words, physical reality, physical objects and phenomena become the measure of all things that are inseparable from the language. A literary work (its language) thus becomes understood as the same object as the objects it represents, that is language becomes reality. This means then that a literary work is deprived of its aesthetic function, that is of a quality which forms the ontological basis of literature itself. What is misunderstood here is the working of two different principles, versions of reality and ontological systems. As Paul de Man argues,

“Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge ‘reality,’ but because it is not ‘a priori’ certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are ‘like’ those, of the phenomenal world [...]

It would be unfortunate, for example, to confuse the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies” (De Man 1982:11).

Paul de Man even understands the confusion of linguistic with natural reality as ideology (De Man 1982: 11). The approach of the sociological, ideological and political critics makes any analysis of a literary work ideological, political and sociological, irrespective of the literary and aesthetic values of these texts. Among the most significant ideological approaches to literary texts is Marxist analysis, and the approaches deriving their critical instruments from it (some feminist and post-colonial theories). Dealing with the theories of the naturalization of narrative texts, Mas’ud Zavarzadeh calls such theories neo-mimetic and he argues that

“[...]they see the work of art as a way of recoding the existing version of reality as formulated in various patterns of verisimilitude. They also simplify the act of reading by suggesting a move from the text,

admittedly with some complication, to the world" (Zavarzadeh 1985: 624-625).

Keith Green and Jill LeBihan further suggest that

"With Marxism we never forget that 'literature' and texts are the products of a specific class and are materially produced at points in history, being determined by factors other than divine or poetic grace"(Green, LeBihan 1996: 124).

And the ideological, political and sociological position of a feminist approach can be clearly seen from C. Weedon's words: *"Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directing at changing existing power relations between women and men in society"* (Weedon 1987:1). Some years later, a very similar position can be found in Catherine Belsey's and J. Moore's feminist anthology entitled typically *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*:

"The feminist reader is enlisted in the process of changing the gender relations which prevail in our society, and she regards the practise of reading as one of the sites in the struggle for change" (Belsey and Moore 1989:1).

Despite many literary works' cliché-like character, social and ideological bias, and their authors' lack of artistic mastery, with the ideological approaches many works are understood as good and valuable only because they deal to a certain extent with either class, ethnic or gender identity. Examples of the success of ideology but failure of aesthetic and artistic values may be some works and short stories by the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer (albeit a Nobel prize winner), the novel by British-Pakistani author Hannif Kureishi *My Beautiful Laundrette*, or contemporary Chinese-American author Anchee Min's novel *Wild Ginger* (2002). These novels were critically highly acclaimed for their depiction of interracial (post-colonial), minority (ethnic, homosexual-Kureishi), and cultural (cultural revolution and Maoism in China) issues, but they use rather traditional narrative techniques of social, and perhaps partly even of sentimental realism (Min). Although it cannot be said that these authors are untalented artists, they do not bring any significant

formal, thematic and artistic innovations into the world literary context. Ethnic identity as well as inter-racial relationships have been treated much more interestingly and artistically in earlier works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and, if we speak about the modern post-colonial context, in the works of John Coetzee, Peter Carey or Salman Rushdie, for example. Life under an authoritarian (communist) regime and its absurdities as depicted in Min's novel have been treated from various positions ranging from tragic to humorous in a multitude of works by Central and East European authors (e.g. Czech exile author Josef Škvorecký's novels, Milan Kundera's early novel *Joke* and many of his other novels and short stories). Thus these authors, Hanif Kureishi and Anchee Min, can be interesting from the culturological and sociological point of view as authors informing their audience either about the current state of inter-cultural, ethnic and sexual relationships or about the socio-historical and political condition in the past in a different country (Min). But notwithstanding the talent of these authors, they merely incorporate a relatively new theme into their old and traditional style and poetics. Early in the 20th century, trying to introduce a new poetics and the rhythms of the new period, the Imagists claimed that literature is not necessarily good when it speaks about new things using old language. As they argue,

"It is not good art to write badly about aeroplanes and automobiles; nor is it necessarily bad art to write well about the past" (Jones 1972:135).

Some of the above writers can be said to write "badly about aeroplanes", that is about a new theme, although the word "badly" might be too strong to describe these authors' indisputable talent.

In his novel, Hanif Kureishi uses the poetics of the traditional immigrant novel (ethnic, class issues) extended by a simplistic treatment of sexual issues (the homosexual relationship between a British and a Pakistani boy) evoking a metaphor of differentiated cultural (British-colonized) and sexual (heterosexual-homosexual) understanding. Using the autobiographical mode of the *bildungsroman*, Min depicts the emotional and physical suffering of a girl maturing during the cultural revolution in China, but her novel uses traditional poetics with predictable

plot and characterization emphasizing a traditional struggle based on binary oppositions between good (anti-communism, anti-authoritarianism) and evil (communism, authoritarianism) as manifested in the narrator's perception of reality. On the other hand, the novels by other Asian-American authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan give a much more convincing and aesthetically valuable picture of immigrant experience, ethnic identity, racial, class, and sexual (or "gender") relationships, cultural condition as well as "patriarchal oppression" by the use of an innovative poetics emphasizing the power of storytelling given from different perspectives (Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*), or by the incorporation of (Chinese) myths and "trickster" poetics (Gates, 1988; Smith, 1997) into their narratives.

Although a great number of books and studies has recently been published on the literature and culture of the USA, not so many scholarly books have been produced dealing with the role of aesthetics and ideology in American fiction and arts. Although similar to this book's approach, the book by Madelyn Jablon entitled *Black Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in African American Literature* (1999) has rather limited scope, as suggested by its closely-defined title. The essays included in the present book, however, give a broader, more interdisciplinary and comparative perspective on the subject, and deal with the working of aesthetics and ideology in American literature and arts as well as with the role of aesthetics and ideology in creating the imagery of American cultural identity (especially Obododimma Oha, who is the only exception and who does not deal primarily with the writing of an American author, but through analysis of William Blake's poetry he tries to identify the image of America as projected in the European mind). The book includes contributions by African, Central and West European, Asian and North American scholars investigating and comparing ideological and non-ideological approaches to the analysis of literary, artistic as well as popular works (popular music) mostly by American authors. Most of the papers (with the exception of John Stauffer's and Csaba Csapó's) were presented at the EAAS international conference on *The United States*

of/in Europe: Nationhood, Citizenship, Culture held in Bordeaux, France, between March 22-25, 2002. They were presented in the Workshop 17 American Nation, Race, Gender, Class-Ideology of Art? which was chaired by the editor of this book. All contributions deal with the role of ideology and aesthetics in the creation of meaning in the texts discussed. Most of the essays deal with the way various aspects of American identity are depicted, represented, treated, ideologized and aestheticized in different literary genres, forms of art and media. The approach of most contributions varies from a certain defence of feminist and partly ideological positions and methods of analysis (Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, partly Pi-Hua Ni and Kallas) to closely mythical, semiotic, cultural and partly deconstructionist analyses of the artistic texts (other contributions). The publication of this book would not be possible without a fascinating technical help, formatting, creativity and patience of my colleague PaedDr. Ivana Cimermanová, PhD. from the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Natural Sciences, The University of Prešov, Slovakia.

Most of the contributions try to identify the valuable aspects of poetics and aesthetics of particular American authors and their role in the creation of both meaning and aesthetic experience. Although the emphasis of this book is on the role of the aesthetic or artistic quality of literary texts, space is also given to ideological positions and critical appreciations of ideology and politics rather than aesthetics (Detsi-Diamanti, Kallas). The contributions by the scholars included in this book offer multidisciplinary, cross-cultural and comparative perspectives and represent the diversity of scholarly voices ranging from general discussion on the relationship between ideology and art (Anton Pokrivčák), and between ideology and multiculturalism (Cristina Garrigós), through analysis of poetry (Pokrivčák, Obododima Oha), postmodern fiction (Pi-Hua Ni, Cristina Garrigós), and drama (Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, Csaba Csapó), to comparative analysis of the depiction of the identity of North American Indians in such different media as literature and film (Michal Peprník). In addition, the book includes analysis of Black rap music

(Wojciech Kallas). The chapters are arranged according to the genres and media discussed (analysis of the hybrid genre of autobiography and poetry in the first chapter is followed by analysis of postmodern fiction and (comparatively) film, and further by analysis of drama and music), arranged not necessarily, but mostly chronologically. I have decided to include Peprník's comparative study of literary and film versions of the book in Chapter II dealing with postmodern fiction and film, since the author's analysis indicates a certain connection of the researched texts with postmodernism.

Part I deals with earlier genres such as autobiography, sociological, political and theoretical essays, but also with poetry and partly with theories. It includes a longer, more detailed paper by John Stauffer in which he analyzes mainly Frederick Douglass' novella *The Heroic Slave*, his speeches *My Bondage* and *My Freedom* as well as his works *Progress* (1861) and *Pictures* (1864), and suggests that Douglass was influenced by his reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Politics* and possibly (as suggested by John Stauffer) by the idea of the sublime (I. Kant, E. Burke). Stauffer points out Douglass' attempt to find a connection between aesthetics and the social with the emphasis on the idea of liberty. In addition, he shows Douglass' search for an authentic black aesthetics. In his view, for Douglass, representations of slavery can evoke feelings of freedom and degrees of power. Stauffer emphasizes the way in which representations of freedom in Douglass' works create a crisis of language and aesthetics, and he explores these two forms of representation in Douglass's art.

In another paper, Obododima Oha explores the spiritualization and re/mythologizing of American history, especially in relation to the American confrontation with British imperialism. He shows that William Blake, an English author, reconstructs the history of America, turning American leaders and revolutionaries into mythical protagonists, and re-imagining the American context in ways that insert the exotic and the Gothic within a visualized empire of grandeur. Oha reads Blake's poem *America: A Prophecy* (1793) as a representation of a grand narrative in

which America is understood as a continuation and complementation of Europe. In Oha's view then, in Blake's poem America is depicted and understood as a "New Europe" rather than a "New World."

In the same chapter, Anton Pokrivčák focuses on the representation of being in classical texts of American poetry such as those by Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens. In his essay, he emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of "ontological poetics" in the poetry of these authors, which he understands as poetics resisting ideological and political interpretations by dealing with the universal problem of being.

The subject of **Part II** is postmodern fiction and film. Cristina Garrigós' paper addresses four questions that are intended to open up a discussion on the problem of the connection between multiculturalism and postmodernism:

1. Multiculturalism's possible connection with the postmodern age and its character during this period;
2. Identity problems as part of the postmodern multicultural experience (on the one hand, minorities reaffirming their essential identity, and on the other hand, the postmodern questioning of this belief in its essence, proposing instead a constructed identity based on language);
3. Multiculturalism's possible denial of the Western Rationalistic Tradition (ethnic literatures' possible attempt to subvert the "master" historical Western discourse);
4. Contemporary ethnic narratives' connection to postmodernist (traditionally white and male) aesthetics.

In another paper in this chapter dealing with John Barth's fiction, Pi-Hua Ni analyzes the transition of Barth's fiction from an androcentric paradigm (in Barth's early fiction such as *The Floating Opera*, *The End of Road* and *Dunyazade*) to an androgynous one (Barth's later novel *Sabbatical: A Romance*). Ni has adapted feminist critique and the postmodern concept of gender-crossing first to analyze Barth's early patriarchal narrative paradigm and then to foreground the novelist's accomplishment in achieving an androgynous narrative. Ni also shows the way the postmodern poetics of John Barth's fiction is able to address

ideological and social categories such as gender and class through an aesthetically and artistically valuable and convincing poetics as manifested in his novel *Sabbatical: A Romance*.

Michal Peprník's paper shows that Michael Mann's film adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's novel of the same title, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), is an example of the latest, most radical and ideologically biased mutilation of the original text. In his view, the motif of revenge dominates this film. Focusing on the ideologization of the original narrative pattern of the pre-text (Cooper's novel) and its transformation in Mann's film version, Peprník argues that the film strongly legitimizes the violence of revenge as a pattern of justice-making behavior, and suppresses the option of forgiveness and reconciliation, a perspective associated with female characters in Cooper, and with the Quaker David Gamut in the novel.

The last part of this book, **Part III**, consists of papers dealing with forms of art other than the novel, that is drama, film and music.

In Zoe Detsi-Diamanti's view, nineteenth-century American drama strove to support the image of America as a free and democratic country of unlimited opportunities. This was, however, in contrast to the reality of everyday social and political life marked by growing racial inequality and oppression. In her paper, Detsi-Diamanti explores the way in which early American theatre consciously or unconsciously reflected the ambiguities of American society and rhetoric as it wavered between antithetical notions of reality/imagination, exclusion/inclusion, heterogeneity/homogeneity, and repression/opportunity. The main emphasis is on the way nineteenth-century American drama both reinforced and undermined social structures, political functions and cultural symbols. She illustrates her points through analysis of early nineteenth century plays such as the popular social comedy by Anna Cora Mowatt *Fashion* (1845); George L. Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859). Her emphasis is on analysis of the representations of Black-American protagonists and slavery as manifested in these plays.

In his paper, Csaba Csapó points out that certain literary texts, in this case David Mamet's play *Oleanna*, restrict or even resist interpretation when this is regarded only as study of the extent to which literary forms and conventions can be identified as (natural) manifestations of specific ideologemes or even as determining formats of particular ideological discourses. He emphasizes the aesthetic quality of the play which on the one hand shows the artistic mastery of the author, and deals on the other hand with currently highly-ideologized issues such as political correctness, sexual harassment and gender through the use of convincing and non-teleological poetics.

In his paper on African-American rap music, Wojciech Kallas analyses the lyrics of several songs by the well-known rap group *Public Enemy* and argues that their songs are what could be called "intellectual rap", since they make references to various events from the history of the black community in the USA. Kallas values *Public Enemy's* rap because it seems to represent, in his view, much more than mere entertainment by serving an important social function. Kallas argues that rap songs, including these analyzed, reject the paternalistic ideology used by the federal government and promote the ideology of black racial superiority.

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PART I

EARLY GENRES, POETRY AND THEORIES

I.1 John Stauffer: Frederick Douglass — Aesthetics, Ideology, and the Problem of Freedom

Long after he had escaped from bondage in 1838, Frederick Douglass insisted that he was still a slave. In 1844, while lecturing for the American Anti-Slavery Society, he emphasized that he was a fugitive “not *from* slavery”, as advertisements for his lectures stated, but a fugitive “*in* slavery”— a fugitive and a slave.¹ And in 1849 he continued to refer to himself as a “fugitive slave”, even though his legal freedom had been purchased by sympathizers in 1847.²

It is perhaps understandable that Douglass ends his 1845 *Narrative* not with freedom, but with feelings of bondage. At the end of the last chapter, just before the appendix, he describes his experience at anti-slavery meetings:

*“I seldom had much to say at the meetings, because what I wanted to say was so much better said by others. But while attending an anti-slavery convention at Nantucket in 1841, I felt strongly moved to speak, and was at the same time much urged to do so. . . . It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. **The truth was, I felt myself a slave**, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down”* [my emphasis].³

Douglass’s continued sense of bondage is a curious reversal from his famous fight with Edward Covey:

“This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave”,

he states in his *Narrative* (89).

¹ Nathaniel P. Rogers, “Southern Slavery and Northern Religion,” Feb. 1, 1844, reprinted in David Blight, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Bedford/St. Martins, 2nd ed., 2003), p. 140.

² Douglass, “A Tribute for the Negro,” in Philip Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 1, p. 380.

³ Blight, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, p. 119 (emphasis added. Subsequent quotations from the *Narrative* are from this edition.