English 202 Take Home Final – LONG VERSION

Different novels lend themselves more effectively to different reading practices. *Our Sister Killjoy*, by Ama Ata Aidoo, is an example of this. *Our Sister Killjoy* is an avant-garde novel that pushes the boundaries of what fiction can be. It does not align with conventional traits often used to define modern novels. I wish to examine how the unique form and structure of this novel defy conventional interpretation by comparing it to the classic realist view of fiction identified by Catherine Belsey in *Critical Practice*, indicating how a more traditional reading practice does not serve this text. I then wish to show how post-Saussurean views of fiction, such as deconstruction and ideology critiques, can be used to more effectively understand this novel’s structure and form.

To begin, I want to assess the qualities of Belsey’s so-called ‘classic realism’. Classic realist novels, according to Belsey, have been prevalent since the 19th century. Typically the form of these texts aligns with expressive theory: easily “readable” texts where the reader can discern definite meaning. Belsey describes classic realism as containing three major features, which I will discuss in turn: illusionism, a hierarchy of voices, and a structure of disorder and closure. Aidoo’s novel cannot necessarily be categorized under such headings; therefore it is particularly interesting to assess in what ways it differs, to begin to discern what kind of text it may in fact be.

Belsey’s illusionism is the idea that novels reproduce familiar ways of describing our world in order to immerse readers in their supposed reality. *Our Sister Killjoy* immediately does not appear to comply with this in terms of form. The novel is a jarring union of prose and verse that forces readers to hunt both for the plot of the work and for the sociopolitical views that are particularly addressed in the verse sections. Though my focus is primarily on form, it is also worth noting that Sissie’s view of the world in this novel also defies illusionism. Sissie purposefully objects to both the traditional European and African view of post-colonialism, earning her the titular nickname ‘killjoy.’ She actively defies the status quo in her presented worldview, challenging the reader to disrupt their comfortable preemptive modes of thinking. These features together shatter any idea of illusionism that the reader may have expected.

Next I wish to examine *Our Sister Killjoy*’s hierarchy of voices. The classic realist idea here is that readers have a clear perception of whose opinions and views are reliable and trustworthy in storytelling. The immediate difficulty here is that *Our Sister Killjoy*’s primary narrator is unclear, undefined. There are suggestions that this narrator might be an older, more experienced version of Sissie, an idea supported by the fact that the narrator seems to share many of Sissie’s worldviews. The fact that Sissie is referred to throughout the book as ‘our sister’ also suggests a kind of collective narrator, although who this might be is ambiguous and unclear. Generally, it is hard for readers to put trust in a narrator when they don't know who this narrator is. Then there is Sissie herself. As suggested, Sissie’s views are aggressive and likely uncomfortable to readers, whether African themselves or from the Global North. She seems to disagree with everyone she encounters, every view readers themselves might have prior to picking up this text. This does not make her a narrator that feels reliable or trustworthy to readers; rather, unless readers are extremely open-minded, they may find themselves exasperated with Sissie’s forceful worldview. Additionally, readers don’t have the opportunity to understand Sissie in great depth as a character – only as a vessel for global sociopolitical ideas. She doesn't express much personality or confide emotional truths. This too creates confusion in the so-called hierarchy of voices and a distance from Sissie as a trusted character.

The final aspect of classic realism I want to examine in *Our Sister Killjoy* is the idea of disorder and closure. Most classic realist texts follow a structure of conflict and resolution – something happens that sets off the events of the story, and over the course of the story, that issue is resolved. On the surface, *Our Sister Killjoy* is structured as such. The novel begins with Sissie’s journey, flying from Africa to Europe, and concludes with her trip back to Africa. However, the pattern of structure ends there. The novel overall is quite abstract, offering vignettes and meditations on the problems of post-colonial society rather than a true unfolding of plot. Even “The Plums*”*, the most structurally composed section that tracks Sissie’s relationship with a German woman named Marija, is loose and interspersed with the novel’s characteristic verse commentary. One could argue that there is a sort of ‘plot’ to Sissie’s coming-of-age and coming to the realization about all society’s issues over the course of the novel, but it’s the sort of idea you’d have to squint to see, not a guiding light. The novel also offers little in terms of closure or a resolution for readers. The final section is largely composed of a ‘love letter’ that Sissie is writing to an unnamed love of hers that she has written on her plane ride home – a letter written in transit, which she states she has no intention of sending. This leaves a great deal unclear and unfinished for readers at the novel’s conclusion.

Essentially, this examination of *Our Sister Killjoy* underlines how this novel does not align with a ‘classic realist’ view of a novel’s form and structure. It is not a text made for easy answers and reader satisfaction. This novel also accepts the facts that the issues it addresses are complex, without clear answers or resolutions, and mirrors this within its own form. This text appears to be much more ‘writeable’ than ‘readable’ – a text open to multiplicity, one in which the reader must actively engage with the work in order to comprehend it, one that doesn’t produce answers and yet insists upon questions. Therefore, it is much more prudent to examine *Our Sister* Killjoy using post-Saussurean modes of reading.

Post-Saussurean linguistics present the concept that language itself lacks inherent meaning – it cannot exist in a vacuum. Words only mean things in relation to other words, and language as a whole needs a social environment to become meaningful. This idea lends itself well to a novel like *Our Sister Killjoy*, which embraces the lack of inherent meaning in language, and utilizes this multiplicity to parallel its similarly complex themes. Two post-Saussurean methods of reading are deconstruction, which focuses on the instability of meaning in a text, and ideology critique, which is concerned with the repercussions of these meanings in the work’s sociopolitical context. Both of these can be used to examine *Our Sister Killjoy.*

In terms of deconstruction, this novel uses language in a variety of forms and structures to make readers question what’s put before them. For instance, the novel opens with a single phrase on an otherwise blank page: “Things are working out” (Aidoo 3). This phrase continues onto the next page: “towards their dazzling conclusions…” before continuing into a more complete poem on the following page (Aidoo 4). This opening immediately provokes an abundance of questions in the reader: What things are working out? For whom? What are the ‘dazzling conclusions’ referenced? If they are conclusions, why are they mentioned at the novel’s *start*? The answers seem to lie in what is *not* stated – the blank spaces on the page. This idea very much plays into the deconstructionist idea that language is unstable, with meaning not fixed. Readers must be open to the hunt for answers that are not stated, answers that lie hidden in the blankness of the page.

Another example of the way form is used to show the instability of language and its meaning is in the way that the novel itself appears to be ‘coming apart,’ collapsing from structured prose into poetry. For instance, the first section of the novel, “Into a Bad Dream,” moves from prose to prose poetry and finally true poetry as Sissie is first “made to notice differences in human coloring” upon her arrival in Germany (Aidoo 13). Not only does this form reflect how jarring this realization is for Sissie herself as a character, it also reflects the inadequacy of traditional literary form in capturing such major societal issues as *Our Sister Killjoy* tackles, that seem to be causing society to unravel at the seams. This segment concludes with the lines: “Power, Child, Power. / For this is all anything is about. / Power to decide / Who is to live, / Who is to die…” before going onto the next three pages with the singular words “Where,” “When,” and “How” (Aidoo 13-16). This section is again employing the power of the blank page in addressing quite significant ideas about human relationships. It also leaves conclusions and interpretations of this statement up to the reader, as the novel here transitions into its next section, “The Plums.” This segment is an example of how the novel’s form lends itself to interpretation through a deconstructionist lens.

Ideology critique can be used to analyze the novel’s opening as well. What is particularly interesting about this novel is that it is remarkably self-aware of its own ideology, and thus manages to provide critique within the text itself. The continuation of the aforementioned opening poem demonstrates this, reading: “… so it is neither here nor there / what tickie-tackies we have / saddled and surrounded ourselves with, / blocked our views, / cluttered our brains” (Aidoo 5). These ‘tickie-tackies’ could be viewed as the ideologies that readers come in with, the pre-existing perceptions of post-colonial Europe and Africa – and the choice of the word ‘tickie-tackies,’ which has connotations of triviality and foolishness, makes readers question how sound these ideologies actually are. In this description, Aidoo foregrounds the incoherence of generally accepted post-colonial ideology, preparing readers for the ensuing critique that the rest of the novel undergoes .

Ideology critique also appears in the novel’s second section, “The Plums.” This section of the novel is the most coherent in terms of plot, but still interrupts its own prose storyline with verses insights about the events and conversations surrounding Sissie. It is unclear whether these thoughts are coming directly from Sissie herself or from another unnamed narrator, but what is certain is that this Aidoo’s way of using structure to incorporate her internal ideology critique. For example, when Sissie walks through the town square with her German friend Marija, there is a poem reflecting the absurdity that has brought them both to this time and place: “And Our Sister? / A Little / Black / Woman who / If things were what they should have been, / And time had not a way of / Making nonsense of Man’s / Dreams, would / Not / Have been / There / Walking / Where the / Führer’s feet had trod…” (Aidoo 48). By separating this statement out into verse, Aidoo makes more stark this commentary from the preceding prose. She utilizes form to convey the absurdity of Sissie’s presence in Germany, a country that now welcomes young Africans to study abroad there, but not all that long ago participated in the massacre of people who, like Sissie, were different from the perceived European ideal. This example shows how Aidoo uses her novel’s form to provide her own critique of the ideology of the post-colonial world.

Another instance in which the novel presents its own ideology critique is in the final section, “A Love Letter.” In her letter to her mysterious love, Sissie states: “Since so far, I have only been able to use a language that enslaved me, and therefore, the messengers of my mind always come shackled?” (Aidoo 112). Within the text, Aidoo presents the question of the reliability of the novel’s main tool of form: language itself. If Sissie is writing in the language of the colonizers, the language of the imperialists both she and her ancestors have spent so long trying to break free of, then does Sissie really have control over the language she speaks, or is the language speaking Sissie? Is she confined by the communicative system presented to her? Sissie herself is the one questioning this – and using her language, English, to do so. This segment represents both the ideological and deconstructionist critiques contained within the novel itself.

As shown above, *Our Sister Killjoy* is an extremely complex novel that seems to defy the conventions of typical modern novels, as exemplified by breaking it down alongside traits of classic realism. This traditional reading practice does not align with the novel’s radical form, and as such does not serve critical readers particularly effectively. This novel’s form represents a more abstract, ‘writeable’ novel that lends itself much better to reading methods such as deconstruction and ideology critique. In fact, as well as being amenable to these post-Saussurean forms of critique, the novel itself presents internal critiques of conventional literary form, post-colonial culture, and the impact of language on both. Overall, *Our Sister Killjoy* seems to present a new kind of novel, a novel that defies established structures and forms, to discuss questions that don’t have apparent answers, and forge the literature of a changing age.