

REFLECTION STATEMENT:

A global pandemic, online learning and a 5000-word ficto-critical essay – it's enough to prompt anyone to click “fill cart” on any number of the abundant Self-Help books which currently dominate our literary zeitgeist, right?

My Major Work, *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Foucault*, explores Self-Help Literature’s ascendance into the socio-cultural sphere of 21st century consumerist culture and challenges its efficacy and legitimacy as text type. My critical essay examines Self-Help literature as a cultural barometer, considering the factors of philosophical origins and linguistic specificities that facilitate the spread of pop-psychology in Western society and discerns the nature of its ‘practices’ and ‘principles’. My intended audience for this work targets individuals interested in cultural criticism and the relationship between representational arts and society, including publishing house McSweeney’s and periodicals of narrative journalism in *The Atavist* – publications that would resonate with an audience who engage with creative journal outlets that showcase critical essays with a discursive appeal and thus, attract them to a composition that is ironically constructed in the meta-textual form of a Self-help book itself. My composition endeavours to compel audiences to not only engage on an intellectual level, broadening its appeal beyond academia in provocative textual features of ‘swearing’ and ‘habit listing’ that imitatively parodies Self-help texts as a philosophical, textual and cultural establishment.

In studying great works of literature throughout my Advanced course that include Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, T.S Eliot’s *Poetry* and Nam Le’s *Love and Honour and Pity and Pride*, I was directed to how composers connote their own perspectives on society through their work as a reflection of their views on the Human Experience, inspiring me to

individually reflect on aspects of Western culture that I directly engage with in my human experience, accordingly, the representation of mental health. Personally struggling with anxiety, and turning to Self-Help texts to counter feelings of apprehension brought by a Year 12 education in a societal era of global dismay, I was left uninspired by the ineffective simplicity of their language and ideas and homogenisation of mental health. However, it evoked an irony that I especially appreciated – writing a critique of Self-help texts while personally unravelling.

After initial research into the genre, I was curious as to why there were so few academic studies that linguistically and culturally analysed Self-Help texts, prompting me to consider how Self-help authors continuously construct ideas ways of being in Western society, and applying an assessment of the genre and discerning its literary value in cosmopolitan society with its appeal to the target audience of young adults. Initially, my major work attempted to explore this through a transitory, post-structuralist lens, however, this approach failed to holistically recognise Self-Help Literature's transcendence into the socio-cultural sphere of consumerist culture, which disregarded the reasoning behind the enormity of the market that is demonstrated by their overpowering presence on bestseller lists. After continued research, my study of British Marxist academic Raymond Williams, a transformative scholar in the sphere of cultural studies in the postmodernist era, inspired me to explore a more culturally focused approach, which included wider socio-cultural factors as an influence on pop-psychology as an oversimplified norm. In William's Culture and Society⁵⁶ where he identifies the dynamic nature of culture and the way it is embedded in lived experience,

⁵⁶ Williams, R (1958): Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: a reader. Columbia University Press

experimental drafting and research of his studies anchored my composition away from becoming something limited, and rather, reinvigorated it with culturally significant factors of Self-Help that play with the individual's psyche, ensuring my purpose is effectively conveyed in a conceptual manner relevant to a contemporary audience.

Before delving into a linguistic and cultural analysis, it was essential that I first considered the origins of the genre and its genesis. Researching establishments of philosophy in my daily scroll of social media, I was directed to a repost of Nietzsche's 'To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering' on @TheInspiredLife on Twitter. While in a vacuum I thought this quote to be very insightful, it became reduced by the backdrop of a stock garden image. It is in this way Self-Help authors profit from 'borrowing' profound ideologies on existence from revolutionary philosophers Foucault and Nietzsche, backdropped by criminally digestible language and embellished context, inspiring me to establish my title as: *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Foucault*⁵⁷. Engaging with Anne-Gaëlle Argy's critical thesis on the *Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in Self-Help Literature*⁵⁸ that linguistically examines the tendencies of Self-Help texts to offer one-off, reduced translations of numerous technical ideologies by philosophers who have developed their practices over their lifespans directed me to critically expound the factors in conflict between Self-Help authors and philosophers.

In this way, I responded to Western postmodern philosophy's tradition where the question of dualism between theory and practice arises essentially lays at the heart of the origins of Self-help literature:

⁵⁷ Major Work

⁵⁸ Argy, A.-G (2016): On the Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in Self-Help Literature. PhaenEx

“...Nietzsche and Foucault become critics of self-help themselves, where the use of aphorisms in self-help literature is at complete odds with what philosophy encourages as a practice of reading... ”⁵⁹

It's this illumination of the insufficient credibility of Self-help texts in repurposing postmodernists Foucault and Nietzsche ideas into simplistic interpretations of them that opens a pandora's box – how this genre becomes defined as a cultural process with a diluted literary and philosophical significance.

Encountered through the drafting process, I was inspired by the nature of discursive language in a study of Margaret Atwood's Spotty Handed Villainesses in English Advanced – enthused by a conversational tone that still maintained elements of critical essays, a structure that Helen Sword examines as subverting traditional academic discourse and adopting “...*Unique structural features of hybridity that would be otherwise safely grounded in disciplinary norms...*”⁶⁰ It is Sword's concepts on the stylish individualisation of purely critical work mixed with Atwood's discursive prowess that inspired me to capture the biting nature of Self-Help books, sardonically elevating my concept in satirising a textual replication of Self-help and enlivening my work in a ficto-critical hybridity. I was drawn to Atwood's emphasis on the entertainment that can be evoked amongst an audience through expressing ideas in a personal voice of which blends sarcasm and derision – where when grouped with an academic perspective as in Zadie Smith's That Crafty Feeling, freed me from critical structures to frame a nuanced approach to my composition. I feel this has been critical to the

⁵⁹ Major Work

⁶⁰ Sword, H (2017): Stylish Academic Writing. S.L: Out Of Print Vendor

success of my work as it has allowed me to balance the intellectually capacious perspectives on differing philosophical, textual and cultural elements of Self-Help texts with some levity:

“...Meet Mark.

A 'bang all the ladies' dudebro.

Also, worth 2 million dollars.

And he makes writing Self-Help look like a GODDAMN walk in the park... ”⁶¹

This divulges the elements of truth that exist in all comedy – and when combining the fundamentals of essay writing of clarity and critical analysis with an experimentation of satirical ficto-sections, I was able to holistically uncover its capitalist-propagated nature.

As a part of my English Extension 1 Studies in Literary Worlds where I studied the characteristics and values of Postmodernist texts, I was particularly drawn to Ronald Barthes’ Death of the Author⁶² and his assertion that an author’s intentions and biographical facts should hold no matter in the interpretation of their writing – However, this insightful concept is destroyed by Self-help authors in their textual authority. Examined habit 3, *How to Win Publishing Deals and Indoctrinate People*⁶³, and habit 4, *Awaken the Snake-Oil Salesman Within*⁶⁴, I noted that popular self-help texts are not distinguished as a genre of literature categorised by rhetorical ingenuity or complexity, leading me to question how Covey,

⁶¹ Major Work

⁶² Barthes, R (1968): The Death Of The Author. 1st ed. University Handout

⁶³ Major Work

⁶⁴ Ibid

Robbins and Manson strategically frame their language and personal ‘About the author’ sections to continue expanding the market? In my thorough research of schools of genre theory, Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday particularly resonated with my purpose in his Systemic Functional Linguistics, with his analysis of language as ideational, interpersonal and textual⁶⁵. In following this theory, I broke down the blending of ideas, interactive context and linguistic features that are used by Covey, Robbins and Manson to legitimise the ‘façade’ of new ideas – that in their most insipid form, are plagiarism - thus propagating pop-psychology in an over-saturated market. This research within the investigation process guided me to place Self-Help literature under a rigorous linguistic lens, that extracted the purposes behind the author’s utilisation of specific textual features, refining my purpose into a centralised argument over the course of its composition.

The exact issue of cultural pertinence that authors draw on to construct their works can be analysed through Marx, where I became appreciative of his ideations and philosophies that

‘...people should actually be decent human beings to each other and resist the urge to play into the games of capitalism...’⁶⁶

This consideration enlightened how pop-psychology and the transitory reference to mental health is capitalised upon, where through the research process of Self-help texts in American culture led to the discovery of “*...authors that espouse capital and shun clinical solutions after diagnosing them – a bait and switch approach....*”⁶⁷ But where Marx identifies that the purpose of the capitalist is not to meet social need, but for man to expand his wealth⁶⁸, I realised throughout the writing process that the Self-help authors fuel the delusion that every

⁶⁵ Halliday, M.A.K (2003): On the "architecture" of human language - In On Language and Linguistics Volume 3: London and New York: Equinox.

⁶⁶ Major Work

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Clarke, S., Elgar, E. and Gower, A (1988).: Marx and the Market: University of Warwick

plight is the consumers fault, and the longer this cycle continues – the longer Self-help authors will rewrite the same book with a different title.

Creating and drafting in isolation can trigger a physical and emotional anxiety, and whilst I rejected Self-help texts to treat this apprehension initially, my composition became the real self-help, guiding me through humour, analysis, philosophy and language that left me inspired –

And you can have his inspiration too!

WORD COUNT: 1499

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