Vladimir Mayakovsky's My Soviet Passport As An Example Of Modern Poetry

For my research paper I decided to focus on a certain poem and to analyze it to see if it fits into the modern era of poetry. In order for a particular work to fit into the modern era of poetry, it must form a theme of disillusionment, make use of fragmentation, and have an alienation from society aspect to the work. I will be analyzing the poem “My Soviet Passport” by Vladimir Mayakovsky, to determine if it’s a modern poem or if the poem fits the criteria from earlier eras. The poem seems to fit the criteria of the modernist era of poetry because it describes a form of alienation from society, a disillusionment in the theme, and examples of fragmentation can be seen throughout the work. It goes away from traditional literature because it is not centered around a universal topic such as, heroes vs. villains or good vs. evil. Instead, it focuses on how he observes officials and their reactions to different people’s passports. He seems to think he is alienated from society when he describes their reaction to his passport from the Soviet Union. This poem makes an important point about human nature and shows how humans will often observe and pass judgements about each other while making an attempt to make themselves feel better about oneself though comparison. I will be breaking each characteristic of modern poetry down to explain how this poem fits the characteristic and summarize as to why it does. I will be citing sources to back up my claims and making use of evidence from the poem to add reinforcement. I will also explain how each part of the poem pertains to human nature and I will break down the meaning of each part to show conclusive evidence.

One of the main criteria for modernist poetry is the element of disillusioned themes. Disillusioned themes are themes that portray the human nature of being able to see reality for what it really is. The reason for this new movement of disillusionment in literature could stem from many social changes and conflicts during the late 1800s which caused illusions to shatter and for people to start seeing the world for what it really is. These significant social changes were industrialization, rapid social changes, advances in science, and advances in the social sciences. These rapid changes influenced the theme of disillusionment in the modernist era. The modernist impulse was fueled by a more authentic and objective response to an ever changing world. The enormity of worldwide wars and major social movements around the world undermined mankind’s view of life itself. In the poem “My Soviet Passport”, the narrator describes a theme of disillusion when he says “The sudden as if their mouths were aquake those gentlemen take that red-skinned passport of mine.” This shows how the narrator is attuned to his surroundings and the feelings of the people around him. He is simply describing the travel official’s reactions to different people based on the various passports they see. He refers to the passport’s cover as if it was a race by using the term “red skinned”. This is evidence that the author is using the element of disillusionment to relate to human nature when humans tend to observe and pass judgements on each other, then when the travel officials looked at his passport he accused them as being envious of him by saying, “You now: read this and envy I’m a citizen of the Soviet Socialist Union.” This sounds like a form of illusion on his part, but if you look at the earlier quote, it is evidence that the narrator was already observing the people around him. The narrator is describing his observations of the people and the envy of the travel official when he relinquished his passport to them. The travel official’s reactions to each passport are actually based on all the social and societal changes that were going on in the countries discussed.

Another major form of criteria for modern literature is alienation from society, a common element in modern literature. It can provide the background for many different characters in stories, poems, and plays. Alienation from society portrays a character as being distant from society and usually speaking from an observational standpoint throughout a work. The characters can also feel alienated from their own societies and some characters will see this from both a positive or negative standpoint. In this poem, the speaker seems to see this from a positive, negative and observational standpoint because he passes judgments on the other people around him using the travel official's facial expressions as evidence to explain the treatment of the people around him. The speaker seems observational as well while he describes the actions that are happening around him and using great detail to describe them. For instance, he describes the way the travel officials took his passport from him as if it were a bomb or a hedgehog. He says "They take like a bomb, take like a hedgehog, like a razor double edged stropped, take like a rattlesnake huge and long with at least twenty fangs." He is describing how the travel officials alienate him from the rest of everyone else and treat him as if he were dangerous because of his passport. The narrator makes use of imagery by using negative connotations like bomb and hedgehog. He says "They take without blinking, the passports of Swedes and various old Norwegians." He seems agitated that they would not treat him the same as the others because of his passport. He mentions that they take them without blinking which could be a hint that he is upset that they don't give the same treatment to him as they do to the others. This indicates that he is experiencing alienation from society in a negative, positive, and an observant way. He tries to make it positive by accusing the travel officials caution around him as jealousy. This pertains to human nature because humans do not like to be rooted out and treated unfairly and will often project their own emotions they are feeling, onto the people that are singling them out.

One form of criteria of modern literature that people tend to overlook is fragmentation. Inside modern literature, fragmentation is a form of literary technique used to break up texts or narratives. In modern literature, fragmentation is used to emphasize a point or emotion in a work. Often, fragmentation is used to create drama within a work and add a dramatic feel towards the reader. The reader will be able to feel the dramatic tone within the work and grab a better understanding of the theme. In this poem, the speaker seems to make use of fragmentation in a hyperbolic way to express his feelings of isolation in his environment by the travel officials. The speaker uses fragmentation to describe how he feels by saying "I'd Tear like a wolf at bureaucracy". Although it appears as one line in the paragraph, it is in fact three lines. This is used to describe how he feels towards the bureaucracy in the world around him. The speaker uses fragmentation in a very unique way in this poem. He indents and breaks after most statements he makes. In this quotation, he adds an enjambment after the word "tear", this adds an element of drama and hyperbole to the quotation. This allows the reader to read the poem in three different ways. You could read the poem from just his statements which give the reader a clearer path to what the narrator is getting at. The reader can also read the poem from a more sub textural view by reading the hyperbole within the fragmentation. Finally, the reader can read the poem with both the statements and the hyperbole in the fragmentation to understand the point and the emotion behind the emotion. The speaker seems to only indent when they are providing hyperbolic backing of emotion to the statement. The speaker also seems to make use of the indents when they are describing the details in the statements that they are making. In this quote "They take without blinking, the passports from swedes." (Mayakovsky 2) The statement in this quote is when he describes the travel officials "taking without blinking" and he further goes more into detail with an indent and describes the people they took the passports from were "swedes". These examples of fragmentation pertain to human nature because humans sometimes tend to use dramatic hyperbole and great detail

when they are faced with difficult situations.

In contrast, traditional literature mostly consists of stories that are passed down from generation to generation and after they are past down long enough they will take a fixed form. This type of literature is literature that is centered around a universal topic that everyone can relate to. Some examples of these universal topics; Hero Vs. Villain, Good Vs. Evil, etc. Most traditional plots stem from two sides being polar opposites of each other. The plots in traditional literature usually conclude with good triumphing over evil or the good always being better than the bad. Traditional literature is meant to be universal so that everybody can relate to it. This poem however, stems away from traditional literature because it only relates to one specific group of people. The group of people it pertains to are citizens of the Soviet Union, because of this, the topic is not universal. The plot does make the travel officials look like the bad guys in a way, but it is too broad to really tell from that point. The plot of the poem is the narrator vs. society because he is describing his experience with travel officials and their discriminatory fear of him because of his country of origin. He describes how he is treated differently from the others and how he is proud of where he is from when the poem concludes. During this time period, the Cold War was going on and the West had a tense fear of Russians and Eastern Europeans as a whole because of the tense relations with the United States and the Soviet Union.

In conclusion, “My Soviet Passport” by Vladimir Mayakovsky, meets the criteria for a modern era poem. It possesses evidence of disillusioned theme, alienation from society, fragmentation, and goes against the fundamentals of traditional literature. The narrator provided examples of a disillusioned theme by showcasing the facial reactions of travel officials whenever they took someone’s passport, which show how humans tend to pass judgments on each other based on what they carry and their country of origin. The narrator describes how he felt alienated when the travel officials treated him differently from the others because of his passport, this shows how humans do not like to be rooted out and treated in an unfair manner from their peers. He then made great use of fragmentation to add more emotion and drama to the poem to emphasize how he was feeling and give the reader a few different ways to read the poem. Finally, this poem shows how much it strays from traditional literature due to its non-universal topic and theme. It shows sharp contrast from traditional themes and it is written in a much different style than what was previously accepted. It is important that we analyze this poem because of the message it puts out. People tend to pass stark judgements on each other based on stereotypes, items they are carrying, and nationality. The poem demonstrates how to overcome people’s judgments and be proud of who you are and where you come from. People tend to follow the commonly accepted thought. They do this to fit-in, be accepted by the society in which they reside and feel better about who they are as a person. The question is, do you believe these judgments people tend to make, hurt the framework of the judged person’s credibility? If so, is this why certain people in society can come off as “misunderstood” because of false rumors, cultural bias, and stereotyping?

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