

“American idiot”: Examining Readers’ Subject Position in One of Green Day’s Albums

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ABSTRACT

This research paper entitled “*American Idiot*”: *Examining Readers’ Subject Position in One of Green Day’s Music Albums* is aimed at investigating the ways by which the sixth album of Green Day, *American Idiot* (2004), ideologically positioned the implied readers in opposite to the USA political agenda. A qualitative descriptive study is employed in this present study. In analyzing the album, which consists of 13 songs, three theoretical frameworks are used: *ideological analysis* by John Lye (1997), *context framework* by Adrian Beard (2001), and John Stephens’ (1992) *narrative transactions*—where he locates the implied readers as the ideological function of a text. By having those frameworks within the analysis, the study discovers five socio-cultural issues, recognized as an attempt to position the implied readers in opposite the US political agenda in Bush administration. These assumptions within the issues known as a subject position are ideologically offered to the readers or the implied readers through narrative aspects; point of view and narrator.

Keywords: *implied author, implied reader, subject position, ideology, narrative.*

INTRODUCTION

Ideology is practiced in literary works—as it is considered as belief and social background, is the main cause that a literary work is imbued with certain ideology. The term ideology here, defined by Hollindale (1998), cited on Wannamaker (2009), is beliefs that are left unexamined by the writer and it slips into the text unseen with people's bare eyes. In this case, a song as a literary work, an artifact, and a social product (Eagleton, 2002) is seen as a proper medium to examine how the ideology is manifested and practiced.

It has been decided that one of Green Day's albums entitled *American Idiot* (2004), is the main focus of the study, since the album is highly political and recognized by many people, not to mention the achievements the album has. The album that has been written mostly by Green Day's vocalist, Billie Joe Armstrong, captures the images of the USA related to the aftermath of the tragic event in September 11,

a social practice (Fiske, 1990); that the author brings his own political 2001, known as *9/11—nine eleven* (Egerdahl, 2010). Moreover, the album criticizes the American ideology of what Ryn (2003) called as American Empire Ideology, that generally introduces United States as the leader in order to make the world not only safer but also better—the writer tends to call it as a utopian belief. That the American Empire Ideology engages with Bush's justification towards the raid on Iraq is what the album mostly emphasizes.

Since the album is closely related to the critic towards the US ideology and its agenda, hence, the study is geared to answer the following question which also related to examining readers' subject position in Green Day's album *American Idiot*, and the question is established as follow: "In what way(s) does Green Day's album *American Idiot* ideologically position the implied reader(s) in opposite to

the USA political agenda?” Hopefully, by having this question answered, the readers of the study will be more aware of how song lyrics position the implied readers in a certain way: either to reject or to conform the ideology in the text. In general, the study is expected to prove that the ideology is practiced in society, especially through the role of song lyrics.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct the study, there are several steps taken. It begins with collecting the data from the album *American Idiot* that consists of thirteen songs: 1. *American Idiot*, 2. *Jesus of Suburbia*, 3. *Holiday*, 4. *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*, 5. *Are We Waiting*, 6. *St. Jimmy*, 7. *Give Me Novacaine*, 8. *She's a Rebel*, 9. *Extraordinary Girl*, 10. *Letterbomb*, 11. *Wake Me Up When September Ends*, 12. *Homecoming*, 13. *Whatsername*. The next step is by having a close reading towards three main frameworks in order to see how the ideology is disseminated and manifested in the album. It starts with Beard's (2001) approaches to

texts and contexts—to get a better understanding of each song as literary text, and supported by Lye's (1997) *Ideological Reading*—to uncover what is being mystified in the text. And, Stephens' theory (1992) of implied readers and subject position is employed so that the readers are able to observe how the text disseminates its ideology to the implied readers or listeners.

That listening to the whole songs over time is needed so that the writer could identify and list some issues in the album, and interpret the songs. These steps are followed by applying Beard (2001) and Lye (1997) approaches into the text. Some information in form of interview of the songwriter and band's biography is required as it is mentioned in one of Beard's (2001) approaches—taking into account the life of the author (political, social background, etc.). Unlike short story or novel, a song does not have vivid descriptions towards the setting. This information mostly acquired from two books: Egerdahl's *Green Day: a Musical Biography* (2010) and

Myers' *Green Day: American Idiot & the New Punk Explosion* (2006). During the analysis, Ryn's (2003) *The Ideology of American Empire* is applied to strengthen the interpretation of the ideology of the album. It is expected by having some information obtained from articles, interviews, and books, the writer would be able to grasp the value of the song wholly. Before concluding the findings and results of the study, the writer should determine the subject position along with implied readers and implied author of the album, and that is when Stephen's (1992) theory employed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In research findings section, the writer seeks Lye's (1997) three basic and yet crucial assumptions in dissecting the ideology that operates in the album. The first assumption is to seek things which are natural, just, and right, followed by "What or who do these assumptions distort or obscure?" and finally, the findings lead into the last category of

assumptions; that is to find the assumptions which are mystified. The study shows that those assumptions are found in five socio-cultural issues presented in the album. The issues are listed as follows: *The role of media as the "truest" source of information, domestic affairs comes second in priority, society is the site of government's propaganda, the President of USA had absolute power, and USA turns into a dystopian nation.*

The first issue blames the media for creating such disorder by informing chaotic situation in a society, and it is presented vividly in the song *American Idiot*, lines: 2-3 and 8-16. Then, the album asserts that many children are deserted because their parents are so absorbed in their careers, this issue is marked in the song *Jesus of Suburbia*, where several terms related to the topic: *mom, home, children, kids, and son*, are found. The next issue portrays the life of the US society under the force of propaganda—"information or ideas, which are often false, that

an organization prints or broadcast to make people agree with what it is saying” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2007.), initiated by the government. This case is accentuated in the song *American Idiot*, where two adjacent terms are shown: *agenda*—line 12 and *propaganda*—line 13. The album establishes another issue that centers the main cause of the turmoil: the President of the United States named G.W Bush. In the song entitled *Holiday*, the raging-lyrics depicts how ruthless he is. And, he is even associated with one of the cruelest leaders in the world, Adolf Hitler (former Nazi’s leader). The last issue somehow embodies the whole topics above. That the US is no longer defined as a Utopian nation has become a concluding issue of the album. This unfortunate situation is encapsulated in the song *Holiday*.

The research findings section further discovers that the ideological function of the texts called implied reader, and its counterpart implied author—implied version of the real author (Billie Joe), instructs the readers of the album in a silent way

to reject the political agenda through the use of narrative voice— narrator and narrative eyes—persona. The use of persona and point of view have both planned by the implied author to invite the implied reader’s mind to get involved with the idea, and to familiarize it, the choice of words: “we/our/you/I” are all used throughout the album. This perception has consequently set the implied reader to initiate the idea offered. The implied author further creates several roles as a part of subject positioning, presented in five-socio cultural issues: as a kid, a teenager, and the society of the US, which are also offered. These roles are meant to position the implied readers so that they might be able to feel exactly the same as them—kid, teenagers, and the US society, at the time Bush administration ruled the nation, or around the album was made in 2004. This positioning occurs during reading process.

CONCLUSION

The result of the analysis shows that Green Day’s album *American Idiot* ideologically

positioned the implied reader(s) in opposite to or against the USA political agenda in two major ways. It is done by introducing five socio-cultural issues which are considered as negative perceptions towards the US political agenda, and the other way is through constructing the role of persona along with the point of view or the perspective imbued with ideological value.

After conducting the research, the writer suggests some follow up actions related to the present study should be taken, especially for the writers who are going to examine the ideological operation in literary works. That ideological analysis—which based on three major influences; Lye (1997), Beard (2001) and Stephen (1992), might applicable for any literary works as well: short story, novel, poems, etc. The writer further suggests that in examining the ideology of a text, the writers might employ Linguistics approaches, yet it should be measurable, feasible and relevant.

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