

“The Dark Night of the Soul” Richard Miller: *Fresh Off the Boat*

Richard Miller, an English professor at Rutgers University, writes in “The Dark Night of the Soul” about different authors’ reflections on usage of the literate arts. Analyzing Martin Amis, Jon Krakauer, René Descartes, and Mary Karr, Miller observes that “the world is now awash with writing that no one reads”, concluding that “the fetishization of the written word is coming to an end” as society diverts away from the literate arts and towards STEM subjects and technology (441). Expanding the label of the “literate arts” to encompass not only works in print but also to any work related to the arts, such as films, TV shows, paintings, and songs, I believe that the literate arts is not coming to an end and continues to thrive as an outlet to connect with others.

From my own experience, I find the comedy TV show, *Fresh Off the Boat*, to be a refreshing form of the literate arts that has transformed Asian representation in America. Growing up as an Asian-American in the United States, I have grown accustomed to watching TV shows that cast white or African-American families. From watching shows such as *Friends* to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, I fell victim to the mentality that Asians did not excel in the literate arts—our culture focused on mathematics and sciences, so we became doctors and engineers. Why would an Asian risk a stable career path to become an actor or a singer? Could Asian comedians or Asian-based comedy even exist and appeal to the masses of the white majority? Even at a young age in the American education system, I experienced moments when classmates were shocked that I did not like the sciences or when teachers over-rewarded me for being the Asian student who spoke up in class. My culture is stereotyped as smart and quiet, and although I did not understand why society associated these labels with my yellow skin,

almond eyes, and black hair, I accepted it. I gave in to this oppressive mob mentality towards my race. Similar to Amis's commentary "on how we are to make sense of these senseless acts" as Richard Tull's wife Gina was speechless reading the news about a child-murderer in an age of meaningless information, I understood that "there is no ultimate explanation for these acts of brutality" (426). Although this "brutality" I experienced was not literal like the actions of a child-murderer, I believe that the emotional brutality of oppression still warrants a similar case in which the stereotypes were just another piece of information for me to accept as a universal permanence with no explanation. The deluge of white-dominated media created a sense of hopelessness for Asians in media that I was okay with.

White-dominated media perpetuates the concept of "white superiority" since the predominant images shown in media expose people to the lifestyle that is the supposed golden standard. However, *Fresh Off the Boat* added diversity to the canvas of white when, for the first time on mainstream TV, the main characters looked like me. When *Fresh Off the Boat* first aired in 2015, I realized the feeling of excitement and admiration and pride after watching the first episode was one that I had not known I needed, one I had not known I was missing. I could relate to the characters in the show and recognized parts of my culture and lifestyle as broadcasted on TV, all of which was presented in such a way that made the Asian culture both fascinating, endearing, and funny. I was excited for future episodes and felt what Miller would have described as "critical optimism" because as the show grew more popular, it became a credible platform for authentic Asian representation in modern day America (442). The show's popularity is also an indicator that others are eager to learn about the Asian culture and are accepting of our differences. For example, after developing a strong following for the show, I

told many of my Asian and non-Asian friends to watch the show. After each week's new episode, my friends and I would laugh over the highlights of the show. With other Asians, we would talk about how the show was relatable, creating a community of a shared identity. With non-Asians, I would help confirm whether or not the scenes were an accurate depiction of the Chinese culture or whether it was exaggerated or not, giving non-Asians access to my culture while also helping them better understand the show. *Fresh Off the Boat* creates a medium in which Asians can carve out our own images to present and share to the general public. Through the literate arts, we are in control of our culture.

Interestingly, the TV show is based off of Eddie Huang's autobiography, *Fresh Off the Boat: A Memoir*. Although I cannot attest to why Huang wrote his memoir, experiencing his life vicariously has helped me be more comfortable in my own skin. Furthermore, "the memoir thus becomes a vehicle for arriving at an understanding that produces forgiveness" similar to how Karr uses her memoir (440). Although Huang's memoir is not nearly as violent or traumatic as Karr's, by writing about his life and his struggles as an Asian-American in a white country, Huang is coming to terms with his own identity as I came to terms with mine while watching the show.

*Fresh Off the Boat* not only helps me better connect with the Asian-American community and with my own identity, but it also helps my non-Asian friends better understand the culture that I grew up being a part of. I can find solace in the show and in the bonds that the show helped create, something that the literate arts is able to do that STEM subjects are not. Moreover, the Asian actors in *Fresh Off the Boat* are proof that Asians can make a career out of the literate arts and that Asians do not have to only pursue a career in STEM or law. As society continues to focus on diversity, a number of TV shows starring women and main characters of

color increases. These literate arts are important to the people who identify with these protagonists and to the people who previously had no exposure to such characters because either these works help people feel more comfortable in a society that they are marginalized in or these works help the majority better understand the minority through enjoyable mediums of entertainment. Due to the inherent differences in people's backgrounds and upbringings, it may not be possible for our society to develop into a Utopian society that is both happy, accepting, heterogeneous, and diverse in its population. However, I believe that we cannot accept the mindset that "whatever we have done, whatever we are doing, and whatever we plan to do will never have any lasting significance" as Amis pointed out while describing Richard Tull's hopelessness and loneliness when his literary work that "strain[ed] mightily to achieve a high seriousness" attracted no attention or success compared to Gwyn Barry's "eventless, multicultural, utopian... work of no consequence" (428, 425, 424). The purpose of critical optimism is so that we can improve ourselves and strengthen our connections through the literate arts, for the literate arts to be a beacon of hope even in isolation. Therefore, the literate arts will continue being a necessary component in human understanding and existence as the literate arts express and reflect our individual and combined experiences.

## Works Cited

Miller, Richard E. "The Dark Night of the Soul." *Ways of Reading*. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Ninth Ed. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2011. 420-442. Print.