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# **The Intellectual Framework: Analysis to John Ashbery's Selected Poems**

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## **Abstract**

The modern critical studies of the American poet John Ashbery (1927-2017) have showed to be ambivalent to regard him as a later Romantic poet or a postmodern innovative, whose vital role is to accomplish the postmodern project. Many of his major poems comprise a kind of repertoire that determines an obvious dealing of Romantic subjects and implications dealt carefully by the poet. His later poems, however, are regarded with postmodern themes like the incomprehension of the American individual due to the unparalleled modifications and crises the society witnessed. The main purpose of this research is to analytically survey selected poems of Ashbery to determine whether he is Romantic or postmodern, accessing prompts from criticizers like Bloom, Miller and Longenbach. It is one of the successful conclusions that Ashbery observes to the Romantic spirit but for unromantic targets. Thus, he conveys confessional themes on one hand and tackles postmodern accurate themes related to the principal of the American society in which he lives and writes on the other.

**Keywords:** Ashbery, postmodern poetry, romantic poetry.

The poetry of John Ashbery fascinated the attention of the literary academics and critics for its suggestiveness, attractiveness and its concern with contemporary social and cultural matters, demonstrating the thought of the postmodern epoch particularly in its earlier stages. It accrues a sense of indetermination and self-awareness against the given certainties in man's life. The poetry of that time is characterized by a wonderful and playful language and intellectual suggestiveness as reproduced in the New York School of poetry in general and Ashbery in particular.<sup>1</sup> The poetry of Ashbery is valued as a brilliant embodiment of a controversial period of time that spreads from innovation, reflecting the severe changes which hover the authenticity of modern American persons and are reflected in their feelings. In addition, his poetry continues to include his postmodern thought which is declared as an extension to modernism, revealing the sequitur of the additional watersheds and their negative impact on the postmodern man. In this setting, Stephen Paul Miller ratifies that Ashbery's poems not only realistic, but also cultural products of his times:

I am thus not arguing that Ashbery's poetry is really realistic. More significantly, I contend that a typical Ashbery poem is effective as a poem and cultural product because it clarifies the workings of that poem's historical period and our present understanding of that period.<sup>2</sup>

Ashbery's poems are, at any rate, cultural products that afford a thoughtful sympathetic of its time in which the poet exposes his views to readers, employing his poetic originality to achieve his intention. Ashbery is basically effected by the romantic doctrine as he is categorized by Harold Bloom as a belated romantic poet in the line of Wordsworth, Whitman, Stevens and Emerson;<sup>3</sup> and by Helen Vendler, he is labeled as "an undeniably original poet"<sup>4</sup>.

To critically scrutinize the scope of the thematic range in Ashbery's poetry, it is mandatory to have a satisfactory contextual about his literary vocation and the conditions behind his poetic genuine. Thus, James Longenbach considers acquainting Ashbery's surrounding as inherent as that of T.S. Eliot's to the modern age; otherwise, judging Ashbery's poetry would be unfair:

... The most complete treatment of Ashbery's career to date is that Ashbery's poetry can hardly be discussed without almost



constant reference to an extraordinarily wide range of procedures: any effort to limit strategically our sense of Ashbery's openness to his modernist past is pound to do the poetry an injustice. And even if the poems [of Ashbery] seem more advanced than Eliot's – more open to the demotic language, more accommodating to popular culture, more suspicious of the lyric's unified voice – the poems are nonetheless unthinkable without Eliot's example.<sup>5</sup>

Overtly, Ashbery employs all the progressive features of his poetry to reflect the perennial ruefulness of his time which is distinctive in his poems and stems from life's difficulty itself.<sup>6</sup> His chief vision is to reveal man's consciousness, so he is "a poet of consciousness who registers or reflects the meanderings of a mind moving in a world unrealized ..."<sup>7</sup> As he treats these unstable feelings of mind, his poetry seems allusive, ambiguous and syntactically disjointed.

Though, these features could not be weighted as notable because Ashbery is mostly concerned with the awareness of the postmodern man whose era establishes the modern zeitgeist. As a poet comprising distinguished poems of multi-faceted layers of meaning, Ashbery has been esteemed as the last American Romantic poet; "an inheritor of the visionary tradition of Romantic poetry from Wordsworth an Whitman to Stephens ..."<sup>8</sup> This appreciation is based on Ashbery's employment of the common romantic characteristics, designating them in a postmodern fame to enhance his poetic sensibility. Thus, it is one of the eminent romantic characteristics harnessed by Ashbery in many of his great poems is the chief characteristic of the greater romantic lyric.<sup>9</sup> M. H. Abrams, in his "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric", classifies the vital standards of this purely romantic kind of poetry by stating:

They present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech .... The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, description, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this

meditation, the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or revolves an emotional problem.<sup>10</sup>

Through examining Ashbery's major poem, it can secretly be acknowledged that in his poem "The Instruction Manual", exemplifies the crucial characteristics of what Abrams calls "Greater Romantic Lyric" and conforms significantly with the traditions of such notable poems as "Tintern Abbey" and "Frost at Midnight."<sup>11</sup> As well as distinguished features with which it is appreciated as a Greater Romantic Lyric, the poem, additionally, has received a great deal of critical studies that mostly distillate on the other component features of the poem which narrate its major themes to undertaking the postmodern authenticity with all its quandary and disorder, harnessing Abram's characteristics of the Greater Romantic Lyric.

Being concerned with the poem's theme and agreement, Mutlu Konuk Blasting praises Ashbery's "The Instruction Manual" as:

The Instruction Manual is Ashbery's most readily poem. Its very readability – a performance not to be repeated – is part of the specific, archaic aesthetic model that the poem reenacts and parodies. This pleasant model, which observes sequential development, positions the imagination as a force antithetical to or technological society. This is a Romantic-modernist figuration of imagination and reality as opposites to be reconciled in the narrative of the poem, which represents imaginary activity as an escape to spaces exempt from the pressures of reality.<sup>12</sup>

The poem, then, does not only include the physiognomies of the Greater Romantic Lyric, but also employs the Romantic fancy as adversative to the postmodern technical society. He follows Coleridge's philosophy of imagination with both of its levels, primary and secondary. He routes with the primary imagination with which he notices vibrations from the exterior world automatically. With the secondary imagination, he achieves his poetic originality by reproducing what is received by the primary imagination to extraordinary objects. Ashbery differs from Coleridge in viewing imagination in that he uses it as a force not synthesizing but antithetical to the purely technological society. It is also employed as an

outlet, in the narrative of the poem, from the monotonous reality through which no any faculty of human soul takes part. It is forcefully engaged to reflect the poem's theme that is the true reality of postmodern man living in a purely mechanized society. The poem opens with lines drawing a general description of a landscape in which the speaker wishes not to write the instruction manual. His sense of frustration is increased with the speaker's recounting of what he gets through from the window:

As I sit looking out of a window of the building, I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal. I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner peace, and envy them – they are so far away from me!

(NA, 387, 1-4)<sup>13</sup>

These lines associate the unsettling state that is successive in the speaker's attention. While hazarding the built-up city scenery from the window, he exposes his denial of the scientific and methodical developments in his society, wishing not to write that manual. These lines detail the inner thought of a man feeling separated from the environment in which he lives and even the people around him. They summarize what the poem is chiefly about and significance Ashbery's poetic experiment:

Instead of referring to abstract ideas, he deals with lived situations and the open-ended verses are more compatible to express the individual mind. His familiar and texture less language reflects the changing moods of the persona. For Ashbery writing is an event, a praxis that aims at dismantling an established ideology and broadens the horizons of meaning, to return to the world of human beings from the specific domains of the abstract and the conventional.<sup>14</sup>

In this respect, Ashbery is considered a bride between the modern poetic custom and the postmodern one, for his main themes that stalk from those invented by Pound and Eliot and his continuance to hypothesis his own poetic specialty, undertaking the themes of the awareness of the postmodern man and the state of his thought. He is not preoccupied with the supplementary circumstances he lives or envisages. As a substitute, he intends to document the instant condition he lives through which reflecting not only the quotidian position, but also an ideological and cultural issues



that initiate new layers of meaning and become more concerned with man's dilemmas in his postmodern era.

Furthermore, these lines formulate the reader's mind to contribute the speaker's worry and take part in the poem's narrative that seems digressive, localized, and inconsistent. Through this unique kind of narrative, the speaker casts the involvements he gets through while he carries on in his way and fantasizing:

And, as my way is, I begin to dream, resting my elbows on the desk and leaning out of the window a little, of dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers! City I wanted most to see and most did not see, in Mexico! But I fancy I see, under the press of having to write the instruction manual.

(NA, 387, 6-9)

While the speaker in the state of unconsciousness, the poem's story reaches its highpoint when he gives a minute explanation of the urbanized city countryside in which he permits the reader to current and facing up his loss of impulsiveness. He evokes the city of Guadalajara, which is the city of beauty in his fictional setting of the narrative to drag the reader's attention to a scope beyond the humdrum atmosphere of the poem. This poetic imagination puts the reader in an indeterminate zone with which he is neither able to forget reality nor stand constantly within it. He keeps looking knowingly at Guadalajara.<sup>15</sup> He also gives the reader a moment of speculation by looking out of the window to have a look at the people outside who are still bewildered despite their living "with an inner peace." (NA, 387, 3). The poet continues to image what he has recognized in the city where every object looks pale and dreary. Humans are spiritually empty as they get through the tedious pressure of reality.

Soon we have reached the top, and the whole network of the city extends before us. There is the rich quarter, with its houses of pink and white, and its crumbling, leafy terraces. There is the poorer quarter, its homes a deep blue. There is the market, where men are selling hats and swatting flies and there is the public library, painted several shades of pale green and beige. Look! There is the square we just came from, with the promenades.

(NA, 388, 59-64)

The poet's interpretation of the city landscape in these lines implies an intermixed theme of both the harsh growing technological development that hovers almost every feature of a society subjugated by social forces, lacking the simplicity that man is longing for and its unique Romantic mood that involves the characteristics of the Greater Romantic Lyric and, even not similarly, Coleridge's imagination. In the last lines, the speaker hints for a solution for the reality of writing the instruction manual by his yearning for the Romantic nature to which he follows to through employing the Romantic spirit in this poem:

And as at last breeze freshness the top of the weathered old tower. I turn my gaze back to the instruction manual which has made me dream of Guadalajara.

(NA, 389, 73-4)

The speaker is now in certainty thinking of achieving the instruction manual after exploration with the reader in another imaginary world he constructs to take him from the existing intolerable reality. Ashbery is, in fact, deeply postmodern Romantic poet as he harnesses the distinguished Romantic vehicles to convey his themes and meanings.

In the sixties, Ashbery decides to write a type of poetry that tackles such themes as time, the past, and depiction of the American society in its cultural setting. Hence, his seminal poem "Soonest Mended" is one of these poems that "manufacture motifs and tropes that are particularly strong in the mid and late sixties. ... the more the poem accepts its empathies to the wider text, the freer and more exclusive it seems."<sup>16</sup> The poem takes its title from the proverb *least said, soonest mended*. Ashbery says that it is "my One-size-fits-all confessional poem which is about my youth."<sup>17</sup> The poem draws the true reality of the American society which is drifted by the cumulative power and technological development. Ashbery prospers to stimulate the reader with the state of life in the American civilization and how it is reduced by this anxious development that relegates the American culture and increases the sorrow and confusion of individuals. It is written to reflect the poet's first impression as world-weary nostalgic when an ineluctable possibility stands at the edge of consciousness.<sup>18</sup> The possibility that stands at the poet's end of consciousness is that the radical changes and the technological development which result in the deterioration of the society, changing it to one dominated by all these forces:



Barely tolerated, living on the margin.

In our technological society, we always had to be rescued on the brink of destruction, like heroines in *Orlando Furioso*.

(NA, 391, 1-3).

The poet's reference to the Italian epic of *Orlando Furioso* supports the poem's cultural content. In this epic, the protagonist Angelica, whom Orlando falls in love with, gets through many provocative circumstances and is saved from monsters, ogres, and other perils (NA, 391, 3). It serves to show the dilemma of the American individual who becomes a part of it. It also links the increase of the technological progress worsens his/her suffering. It also helps the poet to create a sense of indeterminacy in the reader's mind by modifying the consistent method of the Greater Romantic Lyric as coined by Abrams:

'Soonest Minded' announces an aesthetic of being constantly stuck in the middle of the quest for knowledge, identify, and more generally resolutions to the crises that result from that quest, returning repeatedly to objects and images, but finding those objects and images strangely inadequate to the quest. Such an aesthetic dramatizes the meeting of Romantic and indeterminate modes, as it invokes the narrative of the Romantic quest while using objects which do not yield the symbolic depth necessary for their meaningful integration into a symbolic network that could aid the lyrical subject in fulfilling the quest.<sup>19</sup>

According to this statement, Ashbery adapts the structure of the Greater Romantic Lyric, as documented by Bloom, and presents a form that accord with the poem's suggestion and reflects his poetic innovation through which he considers the quest for a solution for the dilemma of the American society as perverting the psyche of the individual. The poet then wields a kind of poetic imagery that is inadequate, as it seems, for the poem's thematic repertoire. In this way, a coincidence between the Romantic lyrical mode and a sense of intermediacy has been created; it is appreciated as Ashbery's intrinsic poetic creativity. He aims to drag the reader's attention to the truth of America and to reveal the drastic watersheds it witnessed and their negative influence on individuals.

In 'Soonest Midnight', Ashbery's chief distress is to treat the interior thought of the American individual who becomes a victim of the benefit of knowledge the American society has observed. This concern leads the reader to anticipate T. S. Eliot's image of the contemporary man which heralds the appearance of the modern age, mostly the image of Prufrock, as a weak, day-dreamer, irritated, detached and even deprived of will. But Ashbery reduces his image with a postmodern plea as a man has undergone harsher circumstances thinking of "Our daily quandary about food and the rent and bills to be paid?" (NA, 391, 1). He succeeds to invoke the Romantic narrative which suits the lyrical frame of the poem.

Ashbery's main concern in his later poems is with the themes of time and longing for childhood. As far as the theme of time is concerned, he once said: "As I have gotten older, it seems to me that time is what I have been writing about anything."<sup>20</sup> The aim behind his interest in such themes is the death of his family members which makes him more devoted to the house and landscape he lived in and related with them. Furthermore, the continuing decline of his mother's health and the sudden death of his father stimulate the remoteness of his innocent childhood as he keeps visiting Pulteneville."<sup>21</sup> It can also be emphasized that Ashbery's interest in such themes is because of the enormous technological development and the rude American politics which has forced the society and the individual by an open-ended recession.

Ashbery wrote his title poem "A Wave" after coming close to death when he "agonized an epidural abscess in the spine which is usually fatal."<sup>22</sup> In this poem, he divulges his thought towards the hasty passage of time when he is getting through the aging process. He employs many imageries and strategies to tackle these themes. In the opening of the poem, the speaker images the scenery in which he spent his early childhood:

And through this the mesmerizing plan of the landscape becomes, at last, apparent. It is no more a landscape than a golf course is, though sensibly a few natural bonuses have been left in. And as it focuses itself, it is the backward part of a life that is partially coming into view. It's there, like a limb. And the issue of making sense becomes such a far-off one. Isn't this sense, this title of my life that I can see – that answers me?

(SP, 324, 68-74)

In these lines, Ashbery is meditating the landscape where he had spent his babyhood and early youth. By remembering his past memory, he acknowledges that this spent time signifies a part of his life. He tries to make a sense of the present, looking for an answer from the whole landscape. Then, Ashbery resorts to the past memory, explicitly to childhood and youth, because he considers their call as a source of mitigation and an escape from the load of aging which is inevitable. He also intends to express the painful passage of time as the future for him is no more than a continuation of suffering and an investable way to his death. In the rest of the poem, he exerts Romantic images from nature for unromantic stresses. This serves to fascinate the reader's attention to his conscious consciousness of time with an reliable postmodern appeal. It is one of the essential characteristics of Ashbery's poetic is that his deep concern with confusion and disorder in the mind of the postmodern man. The speaker also employments a bright image from nature and an extremely associative symbol to reflect the disturbing state of thought in his mind:

As with rocks at low tide, a mixed surface is revealed more detritus. Still, it is better this way than to have live through a sequence of events acknowledged in advance in order to get a primitive statement. And the mind is the beach on which the rocks pop up, just a neutral support for them in their indignity. They explain the trials of our age, cleansing it of toxic side-effects as it passes through their system. Reality explained and for seconds we live in the same body, are sibling again.

(SP, 324, 84-93)

Being haunted by the punitive reality, the speaker imagines the disordered state of life by mentioning to the images of 'rocks' and 'detritus' dispersed on the surface, achieving the image with the allegory of mind as a shore upon which 'the rocks pop up'. Despite its simplicity and purity, this metaphor is carefully concentrated to envision the speaker's internal thought of mind as he gets conscious of many pressures and obsessions. Ashbery, in the same stanza deals with two major ideas central to the whole poem. He reveals his gloom and frustration since he remembers his late family members and the houses in which he spent his loveliest periods of time, confessing the detachment of childhood and judging that time is



passing in a way of no return. He recounts the heavy experience subjugating the American individual who becomes a victim and a part of almost every crisis in the purely technological society. In the last four lines, Ashbery is looking for purgation from the deterioration of the advances of technology, as a continuation to industrialization. He satirizes the increasing advancement of technology for hovering the whole American civilization. The message behind this metaphor and image sums up the whole poem. Ashbery wants to tell that the private dreary past memory is harmful for man when getting through the aging process, driving him to nothingness and death. He also treats man's awareness about the corrupted American polices and the flourishing technology which becomes a weapon in its hand against the individual.

Ashbery continues increasing the poem's thematic range with symbols and images. Most of them are employed to treat the same major themes in the poem from many different viewpoints:

To something one didn't quite confess feeling anxious about,  
but now that it's all out in the open, like a successful fire.  
Burning in a fireplace, really there's no cause for alarm. For  
even when hours and days go by in silence ...

(SP, 332, 347-50)

In the second line of the quote, Ashbery renders the symbol of fire in a metaphor. The thematic consequence of the fire as a symbol lies in that time, according to the poet, becomes a basis of consciousness. Its fleeting passage makes him prediction that the future carries no more than sorrow and impossibility. He understands that even the past memory with all its beauty and innocence could not aid man as he has been undergoing senility. It heralds of death as its hours pass silently without any alarm. Ashbery's main purpose is to image the difficult surroundings embodied in the life-process since the poem's language is interlaced through a complicated amalgamation of connections between the origins and effects of its poetic diction.<sup>24</sup> It is apparent that, as a long representative title poem, "A Wave" is written in a poetic diction in which the poets surroundings and his inner thoughts are both addressed to convey its themes. Thus, it would be irrational to judge that Ashbery's poetry is devoid of ideas,<sup>25</sup> instead, it is written to treat serious themes and accurate issues. The poem coincides between specific private involvements, from one hand, and other shared

realistic issues relating controversially to the American individual whose uttermost is only to survive:

... To live and be lived by, and this way bring all things to the sensible conclusion. Dreamed into their beginnings, and so arrive at the end. ... The old man had removed his hat and was gazing at the grass. At though in sorrow, sorrow for what I had done. Realizing it was now or ever, I lurched with one supreme last effort out of the dream.

(SP, 339, 553-55/ 568-71)

In these lines, both truthful issues and the private involvement of the poet, like the impact of the past memory and ageing, are intermixed. In the first three lines, he embodies life from the beginning to the end in a dream deliberately in order to escape from the harsh reality man gets through in a society full of growths and changes that gratify him to the worthless death-in-life state. In the rest of the quote, the poet is an aged one who moves elsewhere mournfully getting back to the reality with a heave. He keeps reflecting his fluctuated state of mind between his past memory and his present state until he has confirmed that "I'm old enough, exactly." (SP, 343, 700). As Jennifer Ashton concludes, studying Ashbery's poetry requires exploring its meaning as an experience exploring its repertoire with reaction. The poem represents a sequence of reactions with many experiences the poet gets through and intends to dedicate "A Wave" and many other poems to treat them. The poem reflects Ashbery's awareness of talking about his experience which is handled by the themes of time and childhood and his intention by tackling the theme of the image of the later twentieth century American man who suffers the changes that impair his life as well as the society in which he lives. Ashbery's ambiguity and incoherence serve to enhance his poetry and suit the postmodern condition of which he is considered the representative poet.

To conclude, studying Ashbery's poetry is not an easy mission as it deals with many numerous themes and follows to more one important principle. His employ of slightly adapted form of the Greater Romantic Lyric occupies the wider area in his poetry. He employs this type by modifying its construction and style in order to be made appropriate enough to connect his postmodern allusive and difficult themes and intentions. He also writes such brilliant lyrics of indeterminate modes with fundamental

symbolic network to give the poem its lyrical form and conveniently achieve its purpose.

Furthermore, the other aspect of the scope of repertoire in Ashbery's poems is that he is concerned with the true reality of the American society and the many radical changes it has witnessed and its negative impact on individuals who become a victim of these changes. He dedicates notable poems to envisage the inner thought of mind of the American individual who suffers the pressures of his surroundings. The enlightened technological developments and the abusive American polices are among these changes which motivate their consciousness and make their lives lack impulsiveness and serenity. In his realistic poems, Ashbery presents the American individual as a victim calling to rescue him from the hardships of life and the government's oppressive policies.

The private involvements of the poet have their echoes in his poetry. He writes about his sad memory with his late family by expressing his homesickness for childhood and the theme of time. They are preserved for postmodern demand rather than the Romantic one. He is prejudiced by the early British Romantics to develop his own poetic craft. It is logical to classify Ashbery as a late Romantic poet but in a propensity he defends to achieve the postmodern project of writing poetry for experience and reaction rather than for meaning and understanding. This message is held by his generations and differentiates him to be a unique postmodern American poet.

### NOTES

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- 8 Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 131.
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- 17 Marit J. MacArthur, *The American Landscape in the Poetry of Frost, Bishop, and Ashbery* (New York: Palgrave & MacMillan, 2008), 178.
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- 21 MacArthur, 201.
- 22 *ibid*, 205.
- 23 John Ashbery, *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).
- 24 Jennifer Ashton discusses ideas that no one, even Ashbery himself, should
- 25 assert that his poetry is devoid of ideas. Any attempt to interpret a postmodern
- 26 text is supposed to involve a reaction rather than an understanding.

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